

His Extravagant Gift

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

My mother has a tremendous eye for beauty. So it is no wonder, that when we visit each other throughout the year, she takes one look at my suburban mommy “uniform” and offers to take me shopping. While we are out, she makes me try on new styles and colors that I would never have the time, energy or imagination to consider.

“This will look beautiful on you,” she insists, as she brings more clothes into the dressing room.

Inevitably on these outings, my mom purchases something that is fine and extravagant—something I would never buy for myself, something way “out of my league.” Then she gives it to me as a gift. Just because.



where I could possibly wear it. And because I have not let myself enjoy something truly beautiful, I have also failed to express my ongoing gratitude and delight of the gift to my mother.

My final response has been the least generous of all. On occasion, I have declined the offer of a gift because I haven’t appreciated the fullness of its beauty and value for

me. At the time, it seemed like an imposition. Perhaps I was too focused on something else—that dress over there—which was more to my taste and self-interest. But in this final case, I have failed to appreciate both the

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SEVERAL RESPONSES

Through the years, I have responded in several ways to the offer of such a precious gift. The first, and best way, is when I have accepted the gift with the same fullness of generosity with which it was given—to wear that glorious, expensive sweater while I am driving to the grocery store and marvel at its beauty in the midst of the mundane tasks of my life. This enthusiastic acceptance of the gift always delights my mother and ensures my constant gratitude.

Sometimes, my response has not been so generous. Seeing the outrageous extravagance of the gift, I have focused instead on my own suburban mommy “poverty” in the face of the gift’s beauty and value. In this way, I’ve allowed the gift to become a burden, putting it in a drawer and taking it out only occasionally to consider



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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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generosity of my mother and the splendor of a gift that ultimately would have brought great joy to my life.

THE GIFT OF THE SON

In the exact same way, we can have varying responses to the *gloriously extravagant* gift of Jesus Christ. By sending his Son to become one of us, the Father has offered a gift to the world that is radically beyond our wildest dreams for love and happiness. Today, Christ's Risen Presence in the life of the Church is the way for each human person to fully receive a continual outpouring of divine life and love. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, this extravagant gift of the Father can bring an astonishing new glory and passion into our mundane lives.

But do we respond to our life with Christ as a gift, a burden or an imposition? The answer probably depends on whom we direct our focus! If we intently gaze at

the gift and the Giver, it is easy to see beauty and glory. But if we turn the gaze back on ourselves, the gift will neither be recognized, nor fully received.

It is easy to see this reality played out in our own lives and the lives of those who surround us. "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you," we acknowledge every time we are about to receive his great gift. And indeed, Christ's extravagant offer of eternal life and love will always be beyond our human capacity to offer back. Yet for some, this fact is a tremendous burden. Instead of delighting in wonder and awe at the One

they have been given, many Christians focus not on *him*, but on the deficiencies within themselves and the people who surround them. Like the "poor" recipient, they keep the splendid gift of Christ's life and love in a drawer—perhaps only to be worn on Sundays—and then go out during the rest of the week without enjoying the fullness of his extravagant glory. Where they could be offering outrageous beauty, sadly they bring only more poverty into a world longing for the Lord's abundance.

Those who experience the least satisfaction in life, however, are the many who refuse the Lord's gift outright, seeing it as an imposition on their lifestyle and freedom. Distracted by cultural proposals for love and happiness, these would-be recipients stay so focused on themselves that they miss the offering of the One who wants to infuse his glory into everything they are experiencing here and now.

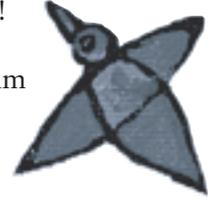
THE GIFT OF COMMUNION

Who can show us how to be the most generous recipients? The Blessed Mother and other great lovers of Christ were humbled by his extravagant offer of life and love, yet they received it with hope in its power to transform their lives. As a result, they experienced an astonishing communion. *This communion is the only way of life that will ever make us happy.* It is a gift that allows us to bring the perfectly extravagant love of Jesus Christ into the disconnected, surface relationships of our lives and begin to live a deeper, more glorious union with them *through him*.

Are you having trouble fully accepting the gift of Christ in your life? Receive one of his daily offerings!

Go to Mass on a weekday. Listen to him in the Word. Serve him in the people who surround you.

Then keep your gaze focused—and watch him transform the poverty of your life with the extravagant gift of himself. ❖



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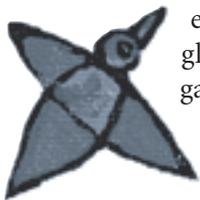
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Gift of Pardon, Gift of Peace

BY REV. ROBERT MORDINO

All good gifts come to us from above. And although we seldom think about it, one single gift will often be the bearer of many other gifts as well.

For example, my secretary Joan recently gave me a birthday gift consisting of a boxed assortment of garden tools. The results of that one gift will be a multitude of collateral gifts. Through the use of those tools, I will be gifted with the blessing of a harvest of fruits and vegetables. I will enjoy the beauty of flowers and the fragrance of roses. While I putter away, I will enjoy mental peace and tranquility.

Much the same happens with the spiritual gifts that come to us from the loving generosity of our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. And nowhere is this truth more evident than in the case of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

HIS GIFT OF MERCY

Scripture describes God our Father as “Dives in Misericordia”, rich in mercy. God’s mercy is indeed inexhaustible. His gift of mercy is so profoundly powerful and liberating, a gift that suffuses our entire being as we absorb the

beauty of the words, “I absolve you from all your sins”.

That gift of sublime forgiveness shrives our very soul, liberating us from sin and selfishness. But God the Father’s mercy endows us with gifts that go beyond the reality of forgiveness alone. What we may fail to recognize are the subsidiary benefits that flow from this sacrament that are an essential part of the core gift of absolution.

God’s sacramental mercy gives us *the gift of inner healing*. It endows us with sacramental graces that will support us in our efforts to “go and sin no more”. It purifies our conscience, enabling us to love ourselves again as true children of God. It draws us into a deeper intimacy with the Lord which makes us spiritually whole. It reconciles us to God, and to those from whom we have been estranged by our sins.

What a tragic mistake it is to perceive Penance as a burden, causing us to experience fear and apprehension. What other professed gift causes such a negative reaction? Even fear and shame are God’s gifts. Without these essential human emotions, we might never avail ourselves of the fullness of his life and love.



A GIFT FOR SINNERS

Our gift of faith gives us all we need to cast Reconciliation in a positive light. Jesus said: “I have come to call sinners”.

To what does He call us? To grace.

To freedom. To intimate friendship.

By faith, we can come to see in this sacrament the depth of the Lord’s love

for us. His suffering and death was the price he paid to become our Redeemer.

In confessing our sins and experiencing absolution, we must destroy the false image of a God who condemns and put in its place the vision of a Father who envelops us in his loving embrace, giving us a “spiritual hug”. A Father who whispers soothing words of comfort and reassurance.

In the end, the Sacrament of Reconciliation accomplishes the incredible: it gives us the “new heart” that Yahweh speaks of in Ezekiel: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people and I will be their God” (Ez 11:19-20).

This new heart is what allows us to fully receive his life on Sunday. Do you accept the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a gift or burden? Only you can decide. ❖

JESUS IS THE GIFT

“This is the horrible root of your error: you claim that the gift of Christ consists in his example, while that gift is his person itself.” ❖

— St. Augustine, *Contra Iulianum*

The Transforming Gift of Family Love

BY PATRICK LOVE

Question: What does a full ice-hockey line including a goalie, a three-on-three basketball game, and a two-pound bowl of pasta have in common? Answer: My family! My mom and dad lovingly conceived one athletic-by-necessity-female followed by five boys, the likes of which can devour most small high school sports teams, and a two-pound bowl of spaghetti without blinking an eye. I am the third in line, the older-middle of six if you will, and I could not have asked for five better gifts in the whole world. Each of my siblings has challenged me to meet Christ in my life, and learn to accept them for who they are.

My sister, Teresa, although I hate to admit it, has probably had the greatest effect on me. Since the first day I stepped out of that huge yellow bus in my Catholic School uniform, with my first gold star sticker placed proudly on my scrawny chest, Teresa has always been there to ignore the gold star sticker and point out the fact that my chest was still scrawny. I guess you could say that we share a mutual love for each other that could be superficially classified as hatred!

THE IRCSBR STAGES

You see, Teresa has a funny way of getting under my skin, and finding anything and everything she doesn't like about me. She's not shy about saying it either, which has prompted a series of events that I like to call The IRCSBR stages; **Insult-Run-Chase-Slam-Bang-Repeat**. You may be familiar with

them, a typical scenario is as follows: sister **Insults** brother, sister **Runs**, brother **Chases**, sister **Slams** door, brother **Bangs** on door until his ego and testosterone refill to suitable level, **Repeat** process after door reopens. It should be no surprise then, when I tell you that Teresa



became an All-Metro Cross Country Runner in high school, while I learned to chase a ball around a court, defending my ego, as people repeated insults, trying to slam the ball in my face.

I never helped the situation; in fact most times I instigated it. It is really hard to love someone that you see everyday, especially if you have a natural propensity to repel each other. It is through these people, though, that God reveals his love for us. Love isn't always easy, and sometimes it is painful. The greatest gift of love in the history of the world was also one of the most painful situations imaginable in the human condition. Mother Teresa wrote, "True love causes pain. Jesus, in order to give us the proof of his love died on the cross. A mother, in order to give birth to her baby, has to suffer. If you really love one another, you will not be able to avoid making sacrifices."

Sacrificing for our family is the primary way we meet Jesus Christ. Sure, we meet him through the eyes of a stranger at a soup kitchen, in our daily prayers, in the people we genuinely get along with, and in the church; but we meet him most intimately when we accept our brothers and sisters for who they are, because they are "flesh of our flesh," and humble ourselves before them every day as Jesus humbled himself before the apostles, washing their feet.

Jesus Christ is unique in having the ability to turn our world right-side-up so that our problem becomes the solution, and so it goes with the IRCSBR stages which can be transformed to: **Identify-Reveal-Choose-Sacrifice-Bring-Reconcile**. With God, the equation is as follows: Sister **Identifies** problem with brother; God **Reveals** himself through sister; brother **Chooses** to see Jesus in sister; brother **Sacrifices** (or sucks it up and shuts up); brother **Brings** hatred to Jesus who transforms it to love. Repeat process, **Reconciling** with the Father each time, and therefore encountering God's loving, forgiving presence. Through these intricate stages, Jesus transforms what can be true temptation and hatred into the gift of familial love. ❖

GETTING THERE...

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. These gifts received at Confirmation can help us live with that challenging other! ❖

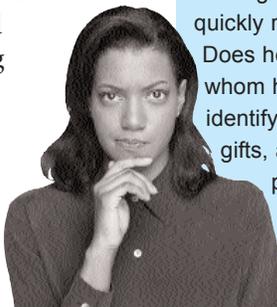
The Gift of Vocation

My teenage daughters are starting to grapple with the rest of their lives. Libby waiting to hear which Catholic high school has accepted her for next year. Kate is starting to look at colleges and universities. Lately, our car rides from one activity to another are peppered with conversations about their hopes and dreams for the future. It is a glorious time for all of us.

As parents, my husband and I are privileged to be able to steward our two eldest children through this phase in their lives. For them, the road ahead is wide open to all sorts of possibilities. But it is astonishing to watch how quickly their view of an amazing life can be narrowed. With Kate, it begins with the choice of a college with the right major that will lead to the right job. “What do you want to do?” the college catalogues ask. I, her mother, quietly try to press an additional question: “With Whom will you walk?”

LOOK AT YOUR GIFTS

This question is not about a career path, but about the vocation that will determine everything else. What is the true nature of vocation? It is looking carefully at the gifts you have received from the Father who created you.



It is trying to determine—through prayer and the gift of his grace—how those gifts are meant to be used in the time and circumstances where you have been placed. Then, it is having the faith to go there!

These are the big questions that every young heart is called to consider. With whom will you walk for the rest of your life? Will there be a spouse and children? Or are you called to love everyone you encounter with the “freedom of God” in consecrated life (*Vita Consecrata* #88)? Who are the friends and colleagues whose lives you will share? And how will the tasks you perform each day help to transform the world around you?

Of course, this vocation stuff can get pretty heady for a young

GETTING THERE...

Sometimes it can be difficult for young people to see their own beauty. If you have a young person in your life, make a point to tell him or her when you notice a gift of the heart. Is she attentive to her friends? Is he considerate of his grandparents? Does she quickly reconcile with her siblings? Does he care well for the girls in whom he shows an interest? By identifying and nurturing these gifts, adults can help young people grow in this most important aspect of their humanity. ❖

teenager! “How am I supposed to figure this out all by myself?” one of my girls asks. You can’t, I tell her, nor are you supposed to. But if you open your heart to Jesus Christ, it will all become clear.

FIND YOUR SELF

“The good that we can propose to young people is always expressed in this exhortation: Follow *Christ!*,” says Pope John Paul II. “We have no other good to propose; no one has a better good to propose. To say ‘Follow Christ!’ means, above all, try to *find yourself as a person*. For—as the [Second Vatican] Council teaches—it is precisely Christ who ‘*fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his highest calling” (Holy Thursday Letter to Priests, 1985).

I tell my daughters to pray to the Lord for themselves and for the people who will be given to them. I tell them to have great trust in the Lord’s plan for their lives, and to stay close to him through the life of the Church. Jesus Christ does not want you to use your gifts just to get great jobs, I say, he wants you to have great lives that will last forever.

“I am the light of the world,” Jesus proclaims. “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). The Lord of love wants to illuminate the way to the future so young people can move forward in joyful hope. As the adults who love them, it is our great privilege—and responsibility—to offer them the only One who can truly determine their vocation, and therefore, all of their happiness. ❖ —MBN

Are Your Priests Gifts?

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

The current “crisis” in the Church this year has prompted me to think about the lives of priests I have known in my parish. Since I have lived in the same parish for over 40 years, I have quite an institutional memory of our parish priests. Growing up with them as an altar server, a “rectory boy” who answered the door and the phones after school, as a volunteer at parish events, and an active member of our parish “teen club,” I came to know our priests in a personal way. I grew to appreciate their strengths, their weaknesses, and their very human struggle with everyday life.

This memory of their simple real humanity is a common theme that strikes me as I watch and read the tragic stories of abuse scandalizing everyone today. Invariably, those who now

are coming forward to expose the criminal behavior of priests in their past, speak about how a particular priest was put on an impossibly high pedestal in their minds. He somehow earned an almost blind God-like trust, then, tragically violated that trust. I suppose it is a manifestation of the sickness of pedophilia that enables adults to find and prey upon vulnerable youngsters who are not prepared to defend themselves.



CHRIST FIRST

After reading these stories, I often think of so many good priests I have known, and I thank God for the generous gift of their priesthood. I also thank God for my parents, who urged me to love the Gospel of Jesus Christ

GETTING THERE...

In many parishes, the current “Passion of the Church” is leading to a true redemption, where parishioners are experiencing a renewed gratitude for the priests who offer them the Sacramental Presence of Christ. Don’t let cultural voices keep you from expressing your care for the priests you know. Like every human person, priests need good friends. ❖

first, and to respect his priests as gifts from God who had to also strive to live that Gospel just like everyone else, nothing more, nothing less. In this way, my parents taught me to love priests, not as gods, but as human persons.

Today, I hear pundits proclaim that the priesthood does not allow men to live the fullness of their humanity, that celibacy somehow reduces priests and that the discipline should be changed. This is simply not my experience of the good men I have known and loved. I don’t know if it is because of their celibacy, but they—more than any others—have taught me how to love. For this, I am eternally grateful. By giving their entire lives as selfless witnesses to a love that embraces, and goes beyond, everything this world offers, they have demonstrated to me the stunning love of Jesus Christ. This love is hardly a reduction of human life. It is not some fabrication or mere ideal. It transforms and elevates everything human life has to

THE FULL MEANING OF HIS PRIESTHOOD

“In the last analysis, the only priest who will always prove necessary to human beings is the one who is conscious of the full meaning of his priesthood: the priest who is a profound believer and professes his faith courageously; who prays fervently, teaches with deep conviction and serves; who follows the principles of the beatitudes in his own life; who is able to love unselfishly and is always available to everyone, especially the more needy.” ❖

—Pope John Paul II, *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests*, 1979, #7

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A Gift to the World

The Church is a gift to the world. This was evident in January 2002 when Pope John Paul II invited the world's religious leaders to Assisi, Italy, for an Interfaith Day of Prayer for Peace. Even some of the hardest hearts in the culture seemed to recognize the Church's authority to gather people of every culture in a gesture of solidarity and hope.

The Pope has always pursued the Church's mission to bring a new vision of human life to the world stage. "The Church knows that the communion received by her as a gift is destined for all people," he wrote. "Thus the Church feels she owes to each individual and to humanity as a

GETTING THERE...

Stewardship is a way of life that sees everything as a gift that can be offered back with love to the Lord. In their beautiful pastoral letter, "Stewardship: A Disciple's Response," the U.S. bishops have outlined a deeply insightful vision of how each of us is called to share our gifts out in the world. Sadly, many Catholics have never read this gem. Give yourself a gift! Order the pastoral letter from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and then share it with some friends. Perhaps your deeper recognition of everything in your life as a gift can help you offer this great truth to others. "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required." *Luke 12:48* ❖

whole the gift received from the Holy Spirit that pours the charity of Jesus Christ into the hearts of believers, as a mystical force for internal cohesion and external growth" (Christifidelis Laici #32).

In gathering leaders of every religion at such a tense time in history, the Pope has shown that the Church must continue to propose the gift that leads to human happiness and peace. Are the rest of us following his lead?

OFFER HIS GIFT

"Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give," Christ proclaims to his disciples (Matt 10:8). As members of his Body, we have been given the gift of Christ's radical love. But we did not do this for ourselves! "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you," Christ reminds us (Jn 15:16). Given this truth, we cannot be content with being grateful recipients. Christ calls us to become generous givers, as well. In this way we participate in the Church's mission in the world.

In their prophetic proclamation about the gift of the Church to the World, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council wrote that man "can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself" (GS#24). Do you offer



THE GIFT OF A FEAST

A gift from the Church for our time is the newly inaugurated May 13 Feast of Our Lady of Fatima. Formerly the Feast of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, the new feast elaborates on the Lord's immanent presence in the tabernacle and in the souls of those who seek him there. God's gift through Mary's Immaculate Heart offered to Jacinta the life of a contemplative, to Francisco the life of a disciple of reparation and to Lucia, the life of a missionary—all great gifts to small children that have and will change the world. ❖

—Daniel LaHood

the gift of your self to the people in your workplace, neighborhood or community? Do you see yourself as the "gift of the Church" to your part of the world?

Like the Pope, each of us is *personally called* to offer Christ-living-in-us in every event and circumstance. Don't be afraid to become the generous giver of this most splendid gift! ❖



FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

Everything is Gift

So, you want a new toy? It's your birthday coming up, and you know exactly what you want. You have the perfect toy in mind. So you drop every hint that this is the gift you want. And suddenly, you get socks! And a new shirt, and new shoes, and you say, "I don't want this." And the giver looks at you and says, "But this is your gift." And you think, "But I don't want it." And then you hear, "well, you need this." Alas! But if you need it, it's not a gift, is it?

That's an interesting question. If you need it, is it a gift? That is the basic problem of grace and nature, isn't it? If we are made for divine life, to share Trinitarian life through Christ, to share it in our humanity, if that's what every human being was made for, then is grace a gift? If we need it, it's not a gift.

And yet, the Church is telling us that we need it and it is a gift. What does that mean? It means that what defines us cannot be like the shoes and socks. The gift of grace is closer to the toy. A toy is pure gift. Just look at the face of any kid receiving a toy. A toy is a pure gift because it's not necessary. So the kids are right. We are made for toys. We are made for play! We are made for not needing.

This is how the divine Persons really live. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are totally dependent on the other. And this absolute dependence is our destiny too. Because radical love is like this: it is a "not-needed needing." Sounds like a childlike desire, doesn't it?

Every moment of our existence is this "not-needed needing" of the radical life and love through Jesus Christ, which allows St. Therese to say, "everything is grace." Everything is gift. So, don't be afraid. Remember to look for the toy. ❖

—Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How did you respond to the most extravagant gift you have ever been given? (p. 1 and 2)

- Do you consider a life with Jesus Christ a gift, a burden or an imposition?
- Describe a time when you experienced the gift of communion with the people who surround you.

Have you ever experienced the Lord's gifts of mercy and "inner healing"? (p.3)

- How does the Sacrament of Reconciliation allow us to be more open to receive the Lord on Sunday?
- Do you consider the Sacrament of Reconciliation a gift or a burden?

Who is the person in your family who is most difficult to experience as a gift? (p. 4)

- Why do you think "true love causes pain" (Mother Teresa)?
- How can you bring the gift of Jesus Christ into your own family?

At what age did you discern "with whom" you would walk? (p. 5)

- What are the gifts that you have been able to steward in the vocation the Lord has planned for you?
- How can you help young people appreciate their gifts, especially the gifts of the heart?

Do you consider priests gifts? (p. 6)

- What was your experience of priests when you were growing up?
- How can your parish community help priests live the fullness of their humanity?

How does the Church show herself to be a gift to the world? (p. 7)

- Read John 15: 11-17. Do you believe that the Lord "chose you"?
- Do you see yourself as the "gift of the Church" to your world?

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offer. Their simple priestly witness to a love beyond this world—yet very much in this world—remains a precious gift to me. These are the priests of Jesus Christ I want my children to meet, to know and respect as a gift from God. I thank God I continue to find them, encourage them and support them right in my parish. ❖