
WHY WE GIVE GIFTS AT CHRISTMAS



At a televised programme hosted by children I was asked “Why do we give each other gifts, at Christmas? Where did it all begin?” This and other like questions had not been submitted to me prior to my meeting them at the programme... I would have liked you to be there with me, I would have heard your own answers in your own words.

As we near the getting together of volunteers coming to the aid of the needy, at Christmastide, may the following words refresh the Spirit of Christmas in each one of us.

A VERY PERTINENT QUESTION

In certain areas, gift-giving seems to go on throughout the year, in some families, marking all kinds of stepping-stones in the life of dear ones: birthdays, wedding anniversaries, baptisms, confirmations, first communions, graduation, promotion, retirement, send-off... Still, at Christmastime there is something very special about gift-giving, it isn't just the fact of “giving something” but “giving to someone really special” who is the reason and the meaning behind these “special” Christmas gifts. I don't know what your answer would have been to the question why we give gifts at Christmas, but my answer was straightforward and sincere: “At Christmas, God our Father give us the best gift of all, the gift of His Son Jesus. That is why we try to imitate the Father as we give gifts to others to remind them of the other gifts they receive from God...”

REASONS OF FAITH

My answer to the children was very sound, theologically speaking. It might have sounded daring, “high-faulted”, but I wanted to answer a very deep question, a very pertinent question of our time, as simply as possible. When I see the stock of gifts piled high near Christmas trees, I also see a few objects placed near a manger scene, I am reminded of the true reasons for gift-giving during the holiday season. For some, gifts are like things owed to children by the parents, or by employers to their employees. Everything that is then in our hearts is expressed by the attitudes and actions apparent, at the giving of the gifts. I remember those years when, as a child, my parents would give me an apple, an orange, and a few candies as a gift, and a very well-appreciated one, at that.

DISTRIBUTING OR EXCHANGING

It isn't merely a play on words to use the word “distributing” or “exchanging”, in speaking of gifts; these words are not used interchangeably. The words used express different realities. When there is a “distribution” of gifts by a committee or a committee, there is behind this gesture a special way of looking at Christmas and, even, looking at the world. And the “theological” answer I gave the children referred especially to the second expression, the second word. If our words are inadequate to express divine realities, it is no less true that our Christmas uses nearly always the word “exchange” when talking about the greatest gift of all, the gift of the Son of God. “Accept what we offer for this Eucharist where an admirable exchange is made: by offering what you have given, may we receive you.” We are reminded of this same reality also at each Eucharistic celebration when the priest or deacon pours water into the cup at the offertory: “As the water is mixed with

wine for the sacrament of the Covenant, may we be joined to the divinity of the one who has taken on our humanity.”

ATTITUDE OF MUTUALITY

If, behind the secret and intimate intentions of holiday celebration organisers, the distribution of gifts runs the risk of highlighting more the riches and power of the donor, an exchange, on the other hand, speaks of the equality of each human being, of his or her potential, richness, and greatness. Besides, “exchanges” can set a limit to the amount spent on the gift. In my 60-odd years of existence I have had the opportunity to be at many distributions of gifts where exaggeration left a rather sour aftertaste: thousands of dollars disappearing in a few moments without making the recipient any happier. The increase of big-ticket gifts is not necessarily followed by deepening and lasting happiness. The mass of expensive and useless gifts do not bring about the happiness caused by the simple human and fraternal exchange of simple yet meaningful gifts.

BACK TO BASICS

I am happy to note that there are other ways of doing, in our milieus, for Christmas gifts to revert to the original meaning of the gesture, for Christians: a reminder of the great Gift which the Father made to humankind when Jesus came to dwell among us. I rejoice that in some families names are picked for giving more symbolic gifts costing little so that the money left over may be used for others or donated to local humanitarian or charitable organisations. It is not easy to reach a happy medium on this issue: there is so much pressure exerted in the promotion of such and such an object, ticket, or bargain. If Christmas gives us a taste of a happy and kindly world, it can also teach us a depressing lesson on the great divide which is yearly widening between the rich and the poor. Guaranteeing one’s neighbour his or her basic rights is surely one of the better ways to experience Christmas. If twenty, one hundred or one thousand hard-earned dollars have already been set aside for gifts “between us”, wouldn’t it be possible for these amounts be given over twelve months to an organisation in our milieu dedicated to helping the poor and needy with food, housing, or transportation?

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL NIGHT

If gift exchanges are true expressions binding us together, you will have all the more reason to sing “The most beautiful night in the world is this Christmas night, in the hearts of men a bit of love from heav’n descends. Separated by so much, this star brings them together, in this most beautiful night” [French carol]. And, “Silent night, holy night... Sleep in heavenly peace.”

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau
Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop’s Journal » (358) (22 November 2000)