

On Giving and Receiving

It is said that Christmas is for kids. I remember my favorite Christmas when I was 12. It was perfect in every way. It was snowy. Midnight mass was profoundly moving. I felt so grounded, so inspired. Everyone was behaving. Christmas morning I received one of the best gifts I have ever received. A gift I had no idea I would like so much. It was a packet of 500 stamps from around the world. I had just started stamp collecting and I spent the whole day sorting them out by country and putting them into new stamp albums I had also received. Dinner was a treatBprime rib with snails as an appetizerBoh Aescargots@ my favorite excuse for eating french bread drenched in seasoned garlic butter. We were living in Switzerland at the time.

Unfortunately that perfect Christmas spoiled every Christmas after that. I was always hoping to recreate that day, and always failed, whether by not being in the perfect mood, or getting that perfect gift, or the verbal fireworks that would often start up once everyone got tired and we were all supposed to be doing our jobs to prepare Christmas dinner.

Then I entered the Jesuits and Christmas became just another day on the calendar. No gifts. No family. No nothing.

But as I developed close friendships in my thirties and forties, Christmas revived--not by receiving the perfect gift, but by giving it. Giving that gift that would make my friends' eyes light up. Giving them something they did not even know they wanted. Their learning just how well I knew them, and how much they meant to me.

But now as I am getting even older I am learning an even greater joy of Christmas. Giving others the opportunity to give to me. Like my students. Gifts that are valuable not for what they are, but for what they mean, for what it tells me about what they think of me and how surprisingly well they know me, especially when they give me a gift I did not know I would enjoy so much.

So Christmas is for kids. And its for friends. But it may be most of all for parents, receiving gifts from their kids, that tells parents what they mean to their kids, and what their kids think would make them feel loved and appreciated. And come to think about it, that=s probably the closest to the original ChristmasBwhere it=s the Christ child who gives to Mary and Joseph as much as give give their newborn child.

Today we also take Christmas a step further yetB today=s collection goes to Catholic

Charities. It's a chance to give to those who don't tend to get any gifts, people of all ages in various sorts of distress, who don't know whether anyone really cares. Some may seem to not care that much for themselves either. In so giving we can become windows through which they can see God's love for them. And in giving to them, they can become windows through which we can feel God inspiring us to be all we were created to be.

As we continue our prayer, let us now give ourselves to God, that God might give himself to us. May we be swept up into that sacred spiral of giving and receiving, that constitutes the heart of Christmas and the rhythm of creation.