

What If There Were No Gifts Under the Tree?

By Jane Bailey

Each year before he died, as December's frenzy reached its peak, my father-in-law muttered, "Wake me when it's over." We'd laugh and buy him "Bah-Humbug" gifts to put under the gift-laden tree. He disliked everything about the holidays, especially the chaos of opening presents.

When my husband and I began our own family, we prided ourselves at having a one-present-at-a-time rule. Things were much less frenetic, but gift opening took a lot longer. With each added child, the pile under the tree got larger, spilling under the coffee table and behind the chairs around the tree.

Now that we have grandchildren, the number of gifts has doubled. Worse, the stockings can't hold all the stuffers and don't stay hung on their hooks. We talk about changing our gift-giving ritual, but the family custom seems embedded in our DNA.

Perhaps we give so many gifts as a sign of the magnitude of our love. I don't believe there can be too much love, but is there such a thing as too many gifts? I knew we crossed the too-many line last Christmas when our grandchildren both wandered off before they finished unwrapping their presents.

St. Nicholas of Myra, the fourth-century bishop who handed out bags of money to the poor, was introduced to the United States in the early 1800s. How did we end up with our current culture of gifts galore from that pious beginning?

Industrialization, an emerging toy industry, Clement Clarke Moore's 1822 poem "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas," the burgeoning retail market, and Thomas Nast's 1881 illustration of Santa Claus in *Harper's Weekly* all contributed to the evolution of St. Nicholas to Santa Claus. By the end of the 19th century, expectations for Christmas gift giving were fully knit into the fabric of society.

It wasn't long before there was criticism of how Christmas had come to be celebrated. In novelist and poet Margaret Deland's 1904 essay "Concerning Christmas Giving," she wrote: "Twenty-five years ago, Christmas was not the burden that it is now; there was less . . . fatigue of the body, less weariness of the soul; and, most of all, there was less loading up with trash." That was written more than 100 years ago! I suspect she would be speechless at the way we celebrate Christmas today.

My father-in-law was not the first to declare war on giving. In 1912 Anne Morgan, daughter of J. P. Morgan, cofounded SPUG, the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving, which President Theodore Roosevelt pressed to join. The idea of reigning in holiday gift giving sputtered out by 1914, and the new acronym for SPUG became



the Society for the Promotion of Useful Giving.

Scroogenomics author Joel Waldfogel argues for abandoning gift giving as it is an "orgy of wealth destruction," with one-third of holiday spending not paid off two months after Christmas. The bottom line is that we need to reprioritize our gift-giving habits.

So what does the church say about all of this? Is there any help for those of us who admit our trees are over laden?

The church readily acknowledges the importance of gifts. The transitional point in the liturgy is the presentation of the gifts: the readying of the altar; the presenting, receiving, and preparing of the

bread and wine; the collection of the offering. The importance and solemnity of gift preparation is hallowed as laypeople carry the gifts to the altar, the bread and wine that will become the sacrament—the gifts of God for the people of God.

We share the gifts and fruits of the spirit with others by the way we live our lives—giving of ourselves and modeling the spiritual gifts available to all.

Advent is the sacred preparation season of the church calendar. Catholic Relief Services suggests we begin our Christmas preparation by giving first to those in need. We come full circle from Santa Claus back to St. Nicholas's gifts to the poor. Those first gifts should be the cornerstone of our Christmas giving.

In *Catholic Gift Giving—Restoring Meaning to Christmas and Birthdays* available at <http://www.crossroadsinitiative.com>, author Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio suggests we have three choices for gift giving:

1. Give in to the culture of extravagance. (*Okay, I confess I'm there. My heart tells me this is not a good place to be.*)
2. Say "Bah-Humbug!" to it all. (*I guess my father-in-law*

was ahead of his time with his humbugging, though his grouching didn't always make for the happiest times around the tree.)

3. Take the traditional Catholic approach and press the gifting custom into the service of the Gospel.

Ah, now we're on to something! Using our gifting in service to the Gospel feels just right. Maybe we don't have to have a barren floor under the tree. We do, however, have to figure out how to give. If we've used our Advent preparation to first give to the poor, then I believe we have taken an initial step toward this third approach to gift

giving.

Scripture points us to gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear as amazement before God. Each of these spiritual gifts are freely given to us. We can give them away without losing any for ourselves. Our job is to pay those gifts forward, along with the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, generosity, modesty, and chastity. We share the gifts and fruits of the spirit with others by the way we live our lives—giving of ourselves and modeling the spiritual gifts available to all.

"All of that is fine," you say, "but let's get real . . . what goes under the tree?" Dr. D'Ambrosio suggests we give gifts that will further a relationship with Jesus—a cross to wear, music to lift the spirit, rosaries for prayer, books to instruct and edify.

Dr. D'Ambrosio also suggests that before going to the tree we visit the crèche. We gather at the manger to sing a carol, read Scripture, and thank God for the gift of Jesus. We

shift our focus from tree to manger.

As we head to the tree, the question we need to answer is: Have we used our resources wisely? It's not a matter of stopping our giving. It's a matter of sharing our abundance in a socially just manner. There are many who will not have anything under their tree, if they even have a tree. Have we given proportionately beyond ourselves?

The legendary gifts of the Magi—gold, frankincense, and the anointing oil myrrh—are said to be symbols of the kingship, the priesthood, and the suffering of Jesus Christ. Is it possible for us to give something that goes beyond symbol and makes a difference in the world—at least our own little corner of the world?

As we prepare for how we will follow the Magi, bearing gifts to this broken world, perhaps we can heed the advice of 13th-century Persian poet Rumi: *Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.*

Rumi's words can provide a guide toward pressing our Christmas gifts into the service of the Gospel. This year when I make out my Christmas giving list, I will ask myself if each person needs a lamp, a lifeboat, or a ladder. There isn't anyone among us who doesn't need one of those things.

I will give my friend who is in the darkness of depression a lamp of beauty when I give her a day at the art museum; my writing buddy who has no disposable income will get a lifeboat of paid-up writing-group dues; my brother-in-law will get the ladder of a scriptwriting book and the offer to edit his latest work as he learns skills for a new career; and my friend with a broken soul whose son suffers from mental illness will get the gift of tickets to a psychiatric conference that we will attend together to heal both our souls.

Perhaps you too will give lamps, lifeboats, and ladders, and heal broken souls this Christmas. Just imagine: a great procession of humanity, shepherds all, following behind the Magi, each bearing light, help, and hope to the world—the gift of the Gospel fulfilled.

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