

**“Recipe for Eternal Happiness: Imitating Christ’s Humility in Order to  
Arrive at the Summit of Generous Charity”  
Homily – Christmas, Mass During The Night (2016)**

**Introduction**

Perhaps one of the most significant features that sets this time of the year apart from all others is the tremendous amount of gift-giving that goes on. Shopping, wrapping, shipping, opening, cleaning up afterwards: yes, lots of time and energy go into gift-giving at this time of the year, not to mention expense.

**God’s Gifts**

While for many people the focus on gift-giving is seen only from the viewpoint of the effect it has on the economy, for us as Christian believers, there is, indeed, a spiritual meaning to the gift-giving we participate in during this time of the year. We can begin right off at the human level: what, really, makes for a great gift? When you think about it, it really requires some humility; humility, because of the generosity that is needed. All of that time and energy and expense certainly have a lot to do with it, but what is most indicative of this humble disposition toward the other is the thoughtfulness that goes into a gift.

When you really put a lot of thought into the gift that you give your friend or loved one, in order to give a gift that you know they will really appreciate and will resonate with them, that is when humble generosity leads to something great – in this case, a great gift. But there is even more to the spiritual meaning of this time of the year for us, when we consider it from the divine perspective, from the perspective of God’s great plan for our eternal happiness. For us as believers, the Advent and Christmas seasons are a time to reflect upon, and give thanks for, all of the gifts that God has given to His people.

All throughout the Advent season which we have now just concluded, we heard much from the prophets of the Old Testament, for they foretold the coming of the Messiah to God’s people. God took a long time – long, at least, from our limited human perspective – to fulfill this promise of a Messiah. Think, though, about all that He did to prepare His people for this, think of all of the gifts He gave them.

First of all, there is the very gift of forming them as a people. He promised the elderly, childless Abraham that he would have an heir, and through that heir God would gift him with descendants as numerous as the sands of the desert; God would make of him a great nation. This is the nation of His chosen people of old. Then He gifted His people with land. He promised to deliver them out of slavery and into a land “flowing with milk and honey.” And if that were not enough, He gifted them with His Law, the Torah, given through Moses on Mount Sinai. God gave them this Law so that they might share in His very own wisdom. Indeed, the entire Bible, really, is a precious gift of God to us, of incalculable value for knowing how to live well in this world and to live forever in the next.

There was a problem, though: the infidelity of God’s people. They profaned the land that He gave them by worshipping the false gods of the pagan peoples they found there. And God’s Law was ineffective, because they did not receive it with a pure heart. They fulfilled external rituals, but ignored the much greater and more important works of justice and special care for the poor and the vulnerable.

Consequently, the Messiah whom God would send would have to do the work for us, to purify us, and so put us back in a right relationship with Him. And so we celebrate tonight

God's greatest gift to us: the fulfillment of the promised Messiah, but not just any Messiah – rather, His very own Son. We stand awestruck before the mysteries of Christmas: a virgin gives birth, God becomes man, our human flesh is ennobled by divine grace. This is the mystery of the Incarnation: in the person of Jesus Christ, God's divinity and our humanity are comingled into one.

This is a mystery the Church reminds us of at every Mass. When the priest prepares the chalice by pouring water into it and comingling it with the wine, he prays silently: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." The two drops of water represent our humanity – finite, limited, by itself flavorless; the much larger amount of wine represents Christ's divinity – infinite, boundless, the only lasting source of joy and gladness.

And so it is that it wasn't enough for God that His word remain written in the Bible; no, His Word had to take flesh through the Incarnation of His Son, born of the Virgin Mary. And His Word continues to take flesh at every Mass: the Word of God is written in the Bible, proclaimed in the liturgical assembly during the Liturgy of the Word, and then takes flesh when the bread and wine are transformed into the Body of Blood of Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh.

### **Our Gift Back to God**

This, indeed, is the greatest gift imaginable that God could have given us: the gift of His Son, which He continues to give to us through the Holy Eucharist. But there is more to it than that, more than thinking about God's gifts to us and thanking Him for these gifts. There is more to it than that because it is a two-way street: it is also a call to us to reflect on, and act upon, our gift back to God.

To truly give a gift from the heart requires humility. Think of how God has modeled this for us, consider the elements of the Christmas story which we have just heard proclaimed in the Gospel for this Christmas Mass during the night. Most of all there is the humility of the Incarnation itself, in which God takes on the lowliness of our human flesh. But that is not enough for him. He is the King of the universe; what kind of a family did he choose to be born into? The ruling class, a wealthy, powerful family, one that attracts the attention of the world? No, he chose a simple, poor, working-class family, indistinguishable from countless others. Where did he choose to be born? The great and renowned city of Jerusalem, the center of the universe for God's people? Wrong again. He was born in Bethlehem, a small, insignificant little town overshadowed by the nearby great and glorious Jerusalem. Finally, who were the first ones to adore this child, the God-made-man? The Roman governor Herod? The chief priests of the people? The merchant class? Those who first adored him gave an indication not only of his humility but also, already, an indication of what this child would do with his life: poor shepherds adored him who would shepherd his people out of darkness and the land of gloom into his great light.

What gifts from God to us! Humility is required to open the heart up to generosity, and just as God is not outdone in generosity, so He is not outdone in humility! That is why He commands us to imitate Him. As St. Augustine says: "Dig within yourself the foundation of humility, and so shall you arrive at the summit of charity."

This is what God commands us to do because God wants us to be happy, and we cannot be happy without generosity, and we cannot be generous – truly generous, from the heart, not just an external act to pacify the receiver or soothe the conscience of the giver – we cannot be

truly generous without humility. This, then, is our gift back to God: He gave His all for us; we in turn should give our all to Him, not holding back, not calculating, not giving back on our own terms. For it is in these little, humble acts of generosity that the greatest gifts are to be found.

Notice how this, too, is the mystery we celebrate tonight. We heard the prophecy from the prophet Isaiah: “For a child is born to us, a son is given us.” And in the Gospel, we heard the angel announce to the shepherds the fulfillment of this prophecy. What did the angel say? “For today in the city of David a *savior* has been born for you.” A child is foretold, a savior is given. Here we have a little child, but a divine Savior.

### **Conclusion**

The gifts we exchange at Christmas will eventually wear out. But if the mystery of Christmas is not to wear out, we must imitate our Lord’s example of humility, for that is what leads to charity. And no act of charity ever wears out: it purifies us, heals us, and makes us more like Jesus himself. No matter how small, a true act of charity is always great. That is what makes us truly happy, and that is what God wants for us; that is the gift He is waiting to give us.