

Christmas

By Archbishop John C. Wester, *People of God*, December 2015

It is unfortunate the first hint we get of Christmas each year is from the department stores or the online advertisements. I say it is unfortunate because this puts Christmas completely out of context and is the opposite of what Christmas is all about. Indeed, Christmas celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Christmas, and its preparation time of Advent, calls us to reflect and live anew the moment of grace when God, in the person of His only begotten Son, became one of us. This inexplicable moment of grace is completely unearned and unexpected. As the word “grace” implies, we did nothing to deserve this outpouring of God’s love. Rather, it is completely gratuitous. As we read in Philippians “His state was divine yet He did not cling to His equality with God but emptied Himself to assume the condition of a slave...” (Phil. 2: 6-7). This act of surrender was repeated again and again in the life of Christ all the way to the cross on which He gave his life for us that we might live forever.

The point of Christmas, then, is not to go shopping for presents but to draw closer to Christ as we contemplate his love expressed in the Incarnation. Our response to this great gift of Christ’s love is gratitude. And the best way to express our gratitude to strive to be more Christ-like as we empty ourselves as he did. And for whom do we empty ourselves? Well, there are many but included on our list must be the poor!

Christ took on our nature, the nature of poverty. He came to us who are poor. You and I are poor as we stand before the throne of God. No matter how rich we may think we are, the fact is that we are completely dependent upon God, the author of every good gift. Without God, we would not exist. That’s pretty poor! Furthermore, as if we weren’t poor enough, we sinned, making ourselves even more desperate. So, God came to our rescue by sending us His Son who, taking on our lowly nature, raised us to His status, making us sons and daughters of God. We, then, the poor, are the ones whom Christ came to save. It stands to reason, then, that Christmas is directed to the poor. How fitting that in our effort to be more Christ-like we follow Christ’s example in the Incarnation by making the poor a priority at Christmas (and hopefully, all throughout the year!).

It is critical, I believe, to remember that we give to the poor not because we are magnanimous but because we are the poor; in giving alms we are giving to ourselves! There is a subtle yet important distinction here. It is a human trait to want to be with our own, to care for our own, to live with our own. This is what we are doing when we make the poor a priority: we are giving to our own since we are all poor in the eyes of God, poor yet loved beyond measure and therefore rich in grace.

This Christmas is an opportunity to take the letters “ts” out of “presents” and replace them with “ce” to form “presence.” The “c” is for Christ as we become more Christ-like and the “e” is for “equal” in that we are all poor, we are all equal in the eyes of God.

This Christmas is an opportunity to bring our presence to each other, especially the poor, and if we want to include a little wrapped gift in the process, well, why not?

It with a sense of deep gratitude that I wish all of you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, a blessed Christmas and a grace-filled New Year. You have given me a most treasured Christmas gift by welcoming me so warmly to this marvelous archdiocese. I am very conscious of my own poverty as I stand humbly in your midst, enriched by your love, support and prayers. I pledge the same to you during these holy days of Christmas and I pray that the new-born Christ child will raise His arms of benediction over us all.