



## *What the Lord Wants for Christmas*

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**B**y now you are in the final throes of Christmas shopping. Even in these economically challenging times, you are no doubt making an effort to find appropriate gifts for spouses, children, friends, and colleagues. After all, gift-giving, especially at Christmas, is more than a superficial social obligation. One's gifts should express bonds of love, friendship, knowledge, and respect for others. Thoughtful gifts say that we've taken the time to discover the interests and preferences of their intended recipients. More importantly, such gifts can show that we've truly grown in our knowledge and love of those God has sent into our lives.

But what should we give the Lord Jesus for Christmas? After all, it's his birthday. Besides, there's precedent for giving gifts to the newborn King. Scripture tells us of the Magi who came from afar bringing symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh: gold, a symbol of royalty; incense, a symbol of hope in the Messiah; and myrrh, a symbol of the sufferings Jesus would endure for us (cf. Matthew 2:1-12).

It would be impossible for us to surpass such magnificent gifts which signify so aptly Jesus' identity as the Incarnate Son of God and his mission as Messiah to give us hope by his sacrifice of love. No gift catalogue, electronic or paper, will help us find a gift for the Lord Jesus and there's nothing he wants or needs at the mall. The Lord is not asking you and me to fight the traffic, brave the crowds, or divulge our credit card number on-line. Nor would He

want us to give him something extravagant – costly, perhaps, but not extravagant.

The costly gift which I believe Jesus most wants to receive at Christmas does not seem like a gift to you or to me. It's nothing we'd want to receive – but then we are not messiahs. It's my belief that the Lord Jesus wants us to give him the sin or the sins with which we most struggle. For some, it might be failing to worship God at Sunday Mass and by daily prayer. For others, it might be a sinful habit or even an addiction or a long-standing grudge against a family member or colleague. Perhaps it's some destructive form of self-indulgence that also wreaks havoc on us and on those around us, or maybe a penchant for dishonesty. You and I won't see advertisements for these "gifts" but they are what the Lord really wants of us. After all, God's only begotten Son was born in time and history to save us from our sins.

How should we identify which sin or sins to entrust to the Lord as Christmas approaches? I'd suggest that the hymn attributed to the angels on the night of the Lord's birth is a good place to start: "Glory to God in high heaven, and peace on earth to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). We should ask ourselves during the weeks of Advent: What sins do I commit that break the bond of peace? What do I do that disturbs my own peace of mind and heart – behaviors which bother my own conscience? What do I do that damages or even destroys peace among my family and friends, or causes unnecessary discord at

work? Do I sin against the unity of the Church by constantly complaining or tearing down the reputation of fellow Catholics? These are the sorts of things we should most readily entrust to the Prince of Peace at his birth.

The specific way we zero in on our “gift” or “gifts” to the Lord Jesus is by a sincere examination of conscience followed by a good, complete, and worthy confession of our sins in the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. The theologian Adrienne von Spyer observes that Jesus lived his earthly life in complete openness to His Father in heaven. Confession of our sins signals that we are progressing in opening our hearts to God and thus becoming like Jesus. The “perfect penitent”, she says, lives as Jesus did: “in absolute openness, hiding nothing, always ready to be moved by the Holy Spirit, drawing assurance not from himself, but from the Father and his Spirit” (Adrienne von Spyer, *Confession*, Herder and Herder (1964), pp. 22-23). Such openness of heart, such a lack of fear, such

trust in Jesus’ power to save – that is the gift the Lord is truly asking of us.

Many parishes have penance services and expanded schedules for the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Advent and next Lent every parish will be offering this Sacrament on Tuesday evenings as part of a diocesan-wide campaign. For now I would heartily encourage you to avail yourself of this Sacrament in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Ask the Holy Spirit for the courage to make a good and complete confession and truly to be sorry for your sins. Then listen for the priest to say: “Through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace. And I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Then listen again and rejoice as the heavenly host echo those words at Christmas: “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth.” And be at peace, knowing you’ve given the Lord the best gift of all – the gift of a trusting, hopeful heart.

