

ARCHBISHOP'S COLUMN
Archbishop José H. Gomez

Christmas and the gift of love

Christmas is a gift. I have felt that way since I was a child.

Growing up, my parents always made Christmas a time of wonder and joy for my sisters and I. There was a certain spirit in the air; everything seemed somehow more alive, as if the world was filled with new possibilities.

We prayed with a little more devotion and spent more time together as a family — getting the house ready, decorating the Christmas tree; we always built a family Nativity scene for the baby Jesus.

We celebrated the nine days of *Las Posadas*, feeling very close to the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph as we accompanied them on their journey to Bethlehem. And, of course, there was Christmas Eve and the *Nochebuena* meal and the Midnight Mass.

Every Catholic culture and family has its own beautiful Christmas traditions. Those were mine, growing up in my Catholic home.

But we all have rich traditions of piety and devotion. Last week, for instance, I had the privilege of celebrating Mass to begin *Simbang Gambi*, a beautiful novena of the Filipino people as they await the coming of Jesus Christ.

As I look back over the years, I realize that I don't remember too many of the Christmas presents I received. But I always remember the presence of God that I felt during the Christmas season.

"*For to us, a child is born.*" That's the gift of Christmas — God's gift of himself, in the child Jesus who is born.

The Church Fathers used to say that love is an exchange of gifts. And love is born on Christmas. Christmas, in fact, makes love possible. Because of God's gift of himself on Christmas, we can dare to love him as he loves us. And because of God's gift, we can share the love he gives us with others.

None of us has anything that we can offer to God that he could possibly need. Yet in his love, Jesus accepts what little we have, our human nature, and taking on our flesh he offers us the gift of his divine nature in exchange.

As St. Paul said, "Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." On Christmas we see this in a beautiful way — Jesus, though he is God, empties himself and humbles himself to receive our humanity, so that he can give us the gift of his divinity.

"To all who received him," St. John said, "he gave power to become children of God."

So this is the gift of Christmas. Each of us receives the power to become a child of God as Jesus was made a child of Mary.

But everything in our lives and in our world depends on what we do with this gift. To be a child of God, to really receive Jesus, means we have to open our lives to the gift of his love. And it means we have to offer our lives back to God as a gift of *our love*.

Jesus left us an example to follow. So we need to always be learning from his life in the Gospels. From the crib of Bethlehem to the cross of Calvary, he gave his life completely as a gift of love.

That is how we should live. By loving others as Jesus has loved us. With the gift of our whole self.

I pray that this Christmas we will all open ourselves to God's gift and allow a new spirit of generous love to be born in our hearts.

Jesus told us to give our love in a special way to those who have nothing they can offer us in return. So in this new year, let us try to have a more compassionate love for the poor, the unborn, the prisoner, the immigrant, and the sick.

We can offer one another gifts of love in little ways.

Because our time is so precious, it is a beautiful gift. So let us try to be more generous with our time, more "present" to others, less distracted. One thing that would help: Let's try to turn off our phones and computers more often so we can really pay attention to the people we love.

Jesus is the greatest gift that God could ever give us. So let's remember also that Jesus is the greatest gift that we can give to others. In the coming year, let's try with new intensity to share the gift of our Catholic faith with our neighbors and in our public life.

Pray for me during this holy season and I will pray for you and your families.

I ask the prayers of Mary, the Mother of God's gift of love, that we might all rejoice in a holy Christmas and a blessed New Year.

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