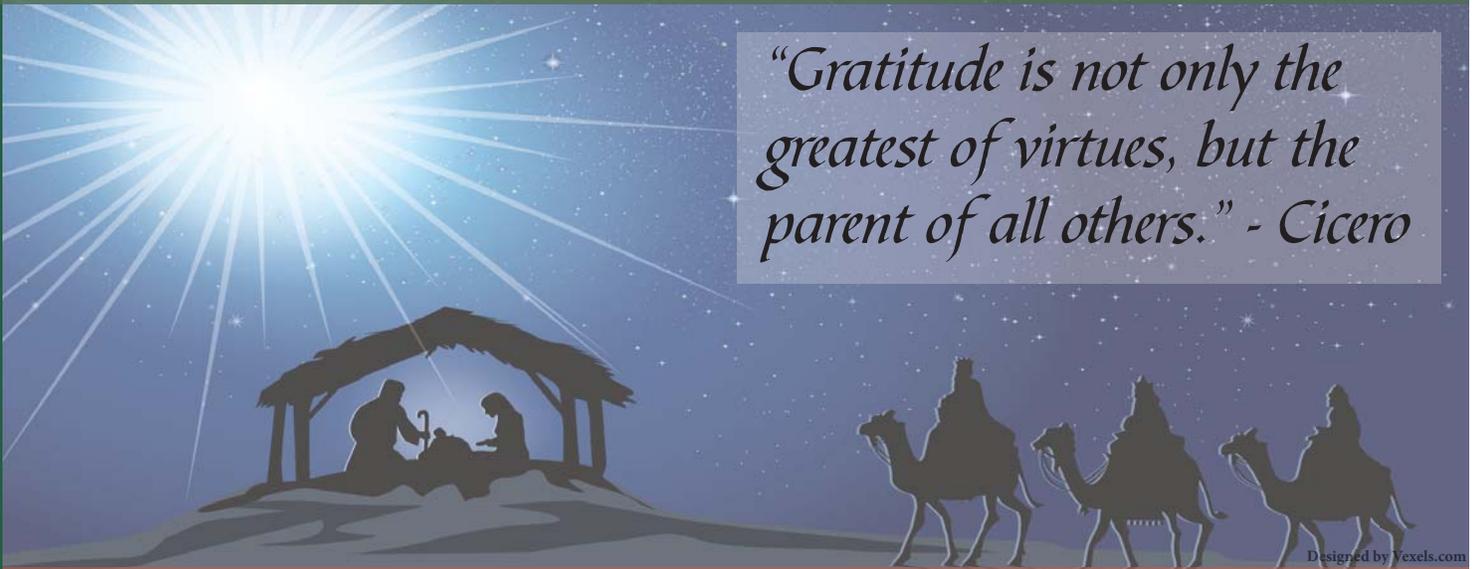


“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.” - Cicero



STEWARDSHIP IN MOTION

Grateful Giving is in Season!

Many, if not most, of us are accustomed to admonitions and lectures this time of year about the abominable admixture of materialism and Christmas. Given the apparently irrepressible onslaught of advertising that attaches to every aspect of modern life, such alarms are both understandable and necessary. The urge to acquire the latest gadget – whether for using ourselves or giving – is particularly intense during the Christmas season. Few of us have also not witnessed the frenzied shopper piling item upon item into a shopping cart, appearing more concerned with volume than a careful match of gift and recipient. The intrusion of pride into our gift selections also is troubling; are we sharing our love and appreciation or displaying our wealth and pop cultural awareness?

With due appreciation for prudence in approaching our Christmas outlays, might we suggest a different perspective. Why not use our gifts as an expression of gratitude? This expression of virtue is a double-sided coin: first we can make giving itself a recognition and appreciation for all that God has provided us. He has blessed us so abundantly that we can pass those blessings forward. Secondly, gift giving allows us to be grateful for the recipient's place in our lives. The presence of family and friends is truly a gift from above. Furthermore, having others in need in our midst – whether among our circle of kith and kin or in our

parish or community – provides us an opportunity to practice the charity that is asked of each of us. Saint Nicholas of Myra, the fourth century bishop whose feast day we celebrate on December 6th, is renowned for his generosity. The tradition of giving gifts on his feast day and on Christmas is attributed to this remarkable saint. Relatively few facts are known about him, yet we do know that on one occasion, hearing of a neighbor of his who had become destitute, Nicholas bundled a lump of gold and tossed it into the neighbor's home overnight. He continued to provide regular chunks of gold to this family, making certain the family crisis had passed before moving on. He sought no recognition of this splendid generosity; he was content simply with the relief of suffering his kindness had provided. Such altruism is a model for us today. In a time when we hear often of the virtues of diversity, we can take instruction in authentic Christian charity from a man separated from us by language, culture and over 1,700 years of history! Saint Nicholas would likely find everyday life in the 21st century bewildering in most ways, awash as we are in technological gadgetry unimaginable to someone from ancient times, but we can assume he would still be able to recognize need among his flock and would respond just as he did back then. An important by-product of a Nicholas' kindness was that his selfless act convinced the family that received help that in turn they, too, should extend this kindness to others – and they did so. A generous action can be, if we can borrow a military term, a “force multiplier,” that inculcates the value and virtue of gratitude to the wider community.

As always, if we familiarize ourselves with the saints, we can discover pathways to holiness by these remarkable men and women who had infused their lives with Gospel-derived values and acted accordingly, most often heroically. No matter our situation in life, there are saints who emerged from similar backgrounds, who conquered the same, seemingly intractable, challenges, and lived lives resplendent with Christian charity.

One of the common links that we can observe in examining the lives of these saints is their grasp of gratitude. Whatever they focused upon in their lives, whether they were founders of religious orders or simple spouses, desert ascetics or authors of the most profound theological treatises, each knew that all their gifts came from God. Further, every saint knew it was important to share these gifts as an integral component of that biblical injunction to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Saint Paul instructs us as he did the elders of Ephesus, ***“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, “It is more blessed to give than receive.” (Acts 20:32-35)***

Obviously, Our Lord was not intending this counsel only for the Christmas season, as these words should impact each day of our lives. Christmas, however, is a special season and the exchange of gifts has become an integral facet of our celebration. Because

even our secular culture, for its own purposes, of course, embraces a rather lengthy and commercial “preparation” period for this holy day, we, too, can use this time to consider our choice of presents as well as our application of gratitude. Beyond that, we Christians have our own special time of preparation. In fact, we call it Advent. As we embrace this time for spiritual growth, we can benefit by integrating our generosity into our development, rather than allowing a merely secular search for gifts to interfere with it. A focus on gratitude for our blessings enables us to sift through the sands of selfishness and discover the wonder of the season. The Christmas message is fundamentally one of love and gratitude. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, *“When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?”*

Let’s close with yet another saint who knew how to express love and gratitude, this not long before he was martyred for his faith, Saint Robert Southwell...

*“Weigh not his crib, his wooden dish,
Nor beasts that by him feed,
Weigh not his mother’s poor attire,
Nor Joseph’s simple weed.
This stable is a Prince’s court,
This crib his chair of state,
The beasts are parcel of his pomp,
The wooden dish his plate.
With joy approach, O Christian wight,
Do homage to the King,
And highly praise his humble pomp,
Which he from heaven doth bring.”*

DID YOU KNOW?

In earlier times in many European countries, it was thought that spirits, or ghosts, were more active during the 12 Days of Christmas; this helps explain the tradition of sharing ghost stories during the season. It was in Victorian England, that the linkage of ghosts and Christmas became most widespread, especially so in the work of novelist Charles Dickens.

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