

Exchange guilt, fears and myrrh for forgiveness, divinity, mirth

So, did you get everything you wanted for Christmas? If not, I've got some good news. We're still in the Christmas season! It doesn't end liturgically until Sunday, Jan. 11, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The child grew fast! It's not too late to get what you really want!

But what do we really want? Well, since we often have to return or exchange gifts, why not exchange the worst parts of our lives with the best parts of the gifts of the Magi. We just celebrated their arrival last Sunday on the feast of the Epiphany. (As I've said before, the Gospels have very different traditions. Luke has only shepherds visit the baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem. Matthew has only the Magi visit the child Jesus living in a home in Bethlehem.)

So what gifts shall we return for something better? I would suggest we exchange our guilt for the gold of forgiveness; exchange our fears for the frankincense of divinity; exchange myrrh for mirth! Let's look at them separately.

We older Catholics, especially, joke a lot about "Catholic guilt." Unfortunately, in my own life, as well as in hours and hours of confession and counseling, guilt is no joke. Really good people are often tortured with guilt. Psychologists call it obsessive compulsive disorder. We religious call it scrupulosity. It boils down to repetitive, self-critical thoughts that result in a near constant state of guilt.

We can't change our genetic predisposition to anxiety and worry. But maybe we can try to simply trust that what Jesus said was true. He didn't come into the world to condemn us. Guilt can only finally be healed by love.

So try in these final days of the Christmas season to give your guilt, over real or imagined sins, and worry, rational or irrational, to God. Exchange your guilt for the gold of forgiveness.

Ask yourself one simple question. Would you want a beloved son or daughter, relative or friend, to suffer? Obviously, the answer is no. Equally obviously, God

doesn't want us to suffer. Any time you feel guilt, simply let it go, and hold onto the gift of God's love. Guilt only has the power we give it. Try giving up guilt and trusting God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness is infinitely powerful.

Second, exchange your fear for the frankincense of forgiveness. Frankincense, incense, is for God. Christmas is the story of you and I being given the gift of divinity. St. Augustine put it so well: "God became human that humans might become God!"

Fear, like guilt, can be both rational and irrational. Rational fear protects us from harm. If there's a lion at your door, close the door! If fear says don't jump out the window, don't jump! But irrational fears can keep us from doing things, going places, trying new things. Trust the God within you to face down the fears within you!

Finally, exchange myrrh for mirth. Myrrh is a perfume used for anointing dead bodies. It symbolized Christ's death. The same death, however, is a cause for mirth, joy, because now death has been defeated!

Our mortal bodies do wear out. We grieve the loss of so many wonderful people in our lives. We grieve the loss of beloved pets.

It would be a cruel God who would put a desire to live forever within us, and then deny that possibility! Christmas is the story of God's entering human history to share our mortality in order for us to share God's life and immortality! Ours is not a cruel God, but a loving God.

So let go of the things you don't want - guilt, fear and death. And accept what you do want - forgiveness, love and the joy of eternal life. God is constantly offering them. We have only to accept them! Christmas really does come every day!