

Greatest gifts

A few weeks ago at a conference I was attending the leader asked everyone to draw a favorite childhood toy.

The people around me sketched tea sets, dollhouses and Atari games.

I didn't even have to stop and think. I drew a picture of my Baby Beans doll, "Beansie."

Beansie was a vibrant yellow cloth doll when my Uncle Brian gave her to me as a belated first birthday gift, and I adored her from the start. The truth is that this little doll was more than a favorite toy. She was practically a family member, traveling everywhere with me, and she was included in every family photo.

My grandmother had a beautiful framed photo of Beansie – just Beansie – on display in her dining room, which never once struck me as unusual. That says as much about my grandmother's love for me as it does about Beansie's status in the family.

Beansie was so well-loved that she needed regular repair, and as she lost her bean filling, she was re-stuffed with cotton and sewn up more times than I can count.

I'm not sure why my siblings tolerated that my doll had a birthday party of her own every December – complete with gifts and a cake. But I do remember one day when one of my older sisters convinced me that Beansie would not be going to Heaven because the pope had declared dolls did not have eternal life. I was devastated, especially because I knew – with her big sister expertise – she had to be right.

A few years into our marriage, my husband and I celebrated Beansie with a memorable bean-themed 30th birthday bash, serving only food made with beans – from garbanzo to green, from vanilla to coffee. The next year the party only featured yellow foods, in honor of Beansie's original yellow, long since faded over time. If Beansie is disappointed that her birthday has been neglected since our sons have entered our lives, you'd never know. She's still smiling.

The toys of our childhood have a special place in our hearts, and, as a mother, I have

enjoyed watching my children find comfort and pleasure in their own special stuffed friends. I especially love how they remember the person who gave a treasured toy three or four birthdays ago.

That's the dream as a gift giver, isn't it, to give the present that is valued and remembered for years into the future? That's why you splurge on the Lalaloopsy Tree House or the Pokémon sweatshirt or the shark armchair. It's why you search and search for the sweater that is the right color or the board game your friend mentioned is a favorite. You hope that you'll manage to pick the right item to bring smiles not just in the moment when the wrapping paper falls to the floor, but also long afterward.

Every year as Christmas approaches, I find myself thinking of the joy of gift-giving. Yes, the reason for the season is not fighting crowds on Black Friday for a great deal. But there is something special about finding tangible gifts to reflect your love for the people in your lives. It's all right to want to demonstrate that love with physical signs. Isn't that what the sacraments offer? They give us grace from God that is shown through the signs of the Eucharist and holy water and candles.

As important as giving, though, is being able and ready to receive a gift with joy and your whole heart, especially when that gift is from God. What a blessing Advent is to us, allowing us to prepare ourselves to receive the greatest gift God has given the world, his own Son, God made Man, born in a stable on Christmas Day. The weeks leading up to Christmas are their own gift, offering a time for us to ready our hearts and consider the enormity of the real miracle of Christmas.

Maybe this Advent will present new opportunities to grow both as a gift giver who finds ways to celebrate those we love in tangible ways and as a grateful, loving recipient. And maybe, just maybe, you'll give someone in your life a present as amazing as the gift of Beansie was for me.