

The joy of gift-giving (or a special moment on the Feast of St. Francis)

Last spring I was on a day-long work retreat at St. Anthony's Shrine in Ellicott City, Md. At one point, I wandered into the gift shop, and I found myself admiring the statues there with my friend and colleague, Fr. Tim Brown, S.J.

He was looking for a St. Francis of Assisi statue to replace one that had broken. He didn't see what he wanted, and he left the store empty-handed.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to find just the right statue and give it to him?" I thought.

A few weeks later I found myself in a conversation where someone mentioned that Fr. Brown's birthday was coming up in September. And I remembered St. Francis.

But it seemed as if I had all summer to hunt for a statue, and though I kept my eyes open, I couldn't find the right one in time for his birthday. I finally decided that maybe the statue I was looking for didn't actually exist—or maybe I would have to wait and give it to him much later. I didn't want to pick the wrong one.

Then last weekend, after Fr. Brown's birthday had passed, I was looking online yet again, scrolling through the statues that just weren't the right ones, and there it was. St. Francis was holding a dove and a flower pot and he had a deer at his side. He was even smiling. The statue was tall enough. And, thanks to two-day shipping, it could arrive at my house on the day before the Feast of St. Francis.

When it came, our boys were so excited to carry the big box inside and help wrap it. But they weren't nearly as happy as I was to hand it over to Fr. Brown.

And, astonishingly, although Fr. Brown is extremely active and busy, and I had thought I might have trouble tracking him down, I spotted him immediately. I walked right up to him and gave him our present.

He unwrapped it then and there, and I could see right away that he liked it. He was amazed that I knew he wanted a St. Francis statue. And I was amazed that I was

watching him unwrap a St. Francis statue on the Feast of St. Francis, on a glorious fall day, while one of the only friends I had told about my statue quest was standing and smiling nearby.

But God is in the details. If I had found the statue easily or on time for Fr. Brown's birthday, it wouldn't have been nearly as wonderful. How did God know, I wondered, that this moment would be so full of joy that I couldn't stop smiling for the rest of the day?

Isn't it magnificent how our God, who created darkness and light, land and oceans, and all the creatures of the world, loves us so much that he makes those ordinary moments so extraordinary? We are so loved, so cherished, and so special to Him.

And, each and every day, He knows exactly what is best for us.