

Time and presence

Celebrating as we are the season of Advent – the time of year when we wait and watch with hopeful expectation for the coming of God’s Anointed One who offers the promise of rebirth and renewal, my thoughts are focused intently on this period of turmoil that disrupts our joy and has caused our Church to experience a profound crisis. If ever we were in need of true renewal, it is most certainly now.

The issues resulting from abuse by members of the priesthood and the failure of some bishops to prevent harm and to protect those most vulnerable has caused a deep and abiding shame among the Catholic faithful – as well as a crisis of identity.

As we travel the arduous path toward our collective and individual healing, it is my prayer and plea that we remain together, relying on Christ the Lord, who alone never abandons us nor disappoints. This is our gift – what we receive as baptized followers of Christ, and it is our gift to bestow to others: understanding, compassion, forgiveness, love unconditionally.

Fully aware that we are deep into the season of festivity and generosity, it is worth considering that the most meaningful gift that we can offer is not to be found online or in any number of retail outlets. It is the gift of ourselves to one another that matters most and which will long endure after ornaments are packed away and store exchanges completed.

Psalm 90 tells us that “70 is the sum of our years or 80 if we are strong” (Ps 90:10). More starkly, the letter of James tells us that we “are a puff of smoke that appears briefly and then disappears” (Jas 4:14). Jesus himself asks us, “Can any of you, by worrying, add a single moment to his life span?” (Mt 6:27). We can give another person money knowing that we are likely to earn more money tomorrow. The present moment comes only once and never again. The time we give to another is an irreplaceable gift.

Spending time with a loved one or a person who is grieving or sick is one of the most beautiful gifts we can give at Christmas. On my first Christmas as Archbishop of Baltimore, I visited a dying priest in St. Agnes Hospital. It was a gift that brought us

close to Jesus, the newborn Savior. Yes, the pace of life seems to be more and more frenetic. But are we too busy to spend time with someone in need? If so, we are too busy for our own good.

Time is not the whole story. It's how we use our time that counts. Showing up and giving of our time means a lot only if we are fully present to those we visit. Suppose we decide to visit an elderly parent or to be with our families on Christmas. But while we're with them, we're counting the minutes until we are free. Or else we're checking the time or looking at emails. If we're counting the minutes, are we not withholding our presence?

To give the gift of presence, we need to block out all other concerns, worries, and legitimate business and focus on the person or persons at hand. When we're helping a family cope with a disaster, we shouldn't be thinking of the mail piling up on our desk but only about the family that needs help. Pope Francis often tells us to accompany one another on the bumpy road of life. He means that we need to focus, not on ourselves, but on the other. This is what the gift of presence means.

It turns out that the gifts of time and presence are the one thing we can give the newborn Savior. Have you ever peered into the manger and wondered what to give the One who entered the world to give us everlasting life? I am haunted by a phrase in the liturgy, "you have no need of our praise. ..." What can we give the Lord that he does not already have? He wants our time and our presence: time for daily prayer, for Mass, for the rosary, for mental prayer. He also wants us to be fully present to him when we pray. And when we are present to the Lord we will also be present when we serve him in the poor, the sick and the vulnerable.

Time + Presence = Love.

May you have a most blessed Christmas!