

“What do you want for Christmas?” This is a typical question we get from our families and loved ones this time of year and it’s a question we lovingly ask our family members as well. Now I’ll tell you right now, I generally hate shopping - but I honestly *do love shopping for Christmas gifts* for my family and friends. I don’t know, there’s something about Christmas shopping *for others* that I truly enjoy – I love getting gifts for my family. Gift-giving is a great Christmas tradition that can help us to grow in love, selflessness, kindness, and appreciation of others. It can help us to get out of ourselves and think more about others.

“What do you want for Christmas?” In a completely non-materialistic way, I think this question also has a spiritual dimension to it in that, as much as we love gift-giving, Christmas is *not* primarily about material things that can never truly satisfy us. *Rather, Christmas is about Christ and what He wants to give us. And there is no greater Christmas Gift than Christ Himself*, Who is our peace and salvation, the One Who shows us what it means to be human—the One Who reveals to us the best version of ourselves and who we are created to become.

I truly believe that Christ poses this question to each of us in a purely non-materialistic, spiritual manner that is centered on *His desire* for us as His disciples! And so during this great Advent season, the question should become for us: “What do you want to give me for Christmas Lord?” Again, I’m not talking about material things that don’t last and can’t bring us perfect happiness, but rather I’m talking about spiritual, eternal things that will last forever.

Brothers and sisters, I have no doubt that for Christmas and beyond, Christ our Savior wants to give us *new life in Him through the Holy Spirit*—a new life of freedom, holiness, and happiness that is centered on an active, deeply personal relationship with Him *in and through* His Church. This burning desire of Christ to give us new life in Him through the Holy Spirit at Christmas and beyond is expressed in the divine invitation we hear in today’s Liturgy of the Word: “Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight His paths!” If the season of Advent had a tagline, it would be this: “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

So how can we practically prepare the way of the Lord so that we can receive Him at Christmas and beyond? How can we practically make straight His paths so that we can enjoy the new life of freedom, peace, and happiness that He so eagerly wants to give us in the Holy Spirit?

Well it's no coincidence that in today's Gospel, we hear St. John the Baptist, the last of the Prophets, proclaiming the message "Prepare the way of the Lord" by *proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. With St. John the Baptist's ministry of proclaiming repentance from sin, He is emphasizing that the best way to prepare for the coming of the Lord is to get rid of our sins that destroy us and prevent us from receiving all that God wants to give us, namely Himself, and new life in Him through the Holy Spirit.

And why would we *not* want to get rid of that which hurts us and brings so much harm and destruction to our lives and the lives of others—not to mention all that deeply offends our loving God? We're so eager to purge on a *physical level* for the sake of our bodies, images, and personal health: "Oh I can't eat that, I can't have that! I have to

work out at this time and in this way, with this specific routine!” Now of course I’m not condemning physical exercise and healthy eating, which are both great things and we have to take care of our bodies—I think physical exercise is a gift from God! But why aren’t we as determined and eager to purge our lives of that which is evil and harmful to us on a spiritual level for the sake of our immortal souls and our salvation?

Now brothers and sisters, Christ comes to us *as we are*, and yes, *He loves us unconditionally as we are, but He doesn’t want to stay as we are!* If Christ wanted to us to stay as we are in our brokenness, our selfishness, and our sinfulness, then He would never have come to us at Christmas in the first place! If Christ wanted us to stay as we are in our fallen humanity and in our sinfulness, then He would never have become man in the Incarnation for the sake of our salvation! Christ comes us in the Incarnation and at Christmas *precisely in order to transform us* and give us new life in Him—a share in His divine life for all eternity! And the way Christ transforms us and gives us new life in Him is through His

mercy, His *forgiveness of our sins*, and the infusion of sanctifying grace into our hearts through the sacraments.

So brothers and sisters, I've said it before and I'll say it again: in order to *prepare the way* of the Lord for Christmas and beyond, *we have to get out of the way*, and that means, dying to ourselves, dying to our selfishness and our sinfulness. "Getting out of the way" means getting rid of our sins with the help of God's grace so that we can enjoy the gift of new life in Christ that He wants to give us at Christmas and beyond. Preparing the way of the Lord means *clearing the way* of any roadblocks and obstacles that are preventing the Lord from entering my heart and transforming it into a divine dwelling place.

So what *are the specific sins* that we need to get rid of with the necessary help of God's grace in order to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ at Christmas and at the end of time, not to mention our own individual deaths, which we have no idea when we will die as individual human beings, but we all need to prepare for that. What are the specific sins that are acting as roadblocks and obstacles to the Lord in His desire to give us new life through the Holy Spirit?

Is it pride? Do we have a stubborn refusal to regularly form and examine our conscience according to Christ and the teachings of His Church? Do we stubbornly refuse to go to confession and receive forgiveness for our sins? Do we claim that we simply don't need to go to confession at all? The Lord tells us in the First Letter of St. John 1:8-10: "If we say, "We are without sin," we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. If we say, "We have not sinned," we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

Brothers and sisters, none of us are perfect and we're all sinners in need of God's saving grace, mercy, and forgiveness, poured out to us through the beautiful Sacrament of Reconciliation. Keeping with pride: Do we hold grudges against others and refuse to forgive those who have hurt us? Do we refuse to seek forgiveness from those *we* have hurt?

Is it lust? Have we turned the beautiful gift of sexual pleasure into a false god that we worship with our selfishness? While this horrible coronavirus pandemic continues, there's another pandemic that is raging across the world that the news media refuses to talk about, and that is the

pandemic of pornography, which enslaves countless millions of men, women, and young people in addiction, lust, and suffering. Pornography destroys lives, marriages, relationships, self-esteem, masculinity, and femininity. This destructive evil fosters a culture of sexual exploitation and abuse that reduces human beings to sexual objects that can be used and abused for one's selfish pleasure. For those who are addicted to and struggling against this destructive evil, please know that you are loved and that there is help, hope, healing, and freedom from this slavery.

Is it greed and envy? Have we selfishly turned money, material possessions, and body image into false gods that control us and enslave us? Is it wrath and sinful anger? Do we struggle to love certain family members or co-workers? When it comes to family members, friends, and co-workers, do we need to grow in patience, humility, mercy, kindness, and compassion?

Is it sloth (spiritual laziness) and gluttony? Do we allow technology and social media to control our lives and enslave us? Do we spend more time on our phones and on social media than we do with our Lord in prayer and spiritual reading? Do we give more time to our

phones and social media than we do to our family and friends? Have we turned our phones and social media accounts into false gods that we worship with all our time and lives? We're all tempted to sit on the couch and engage in the "endless scroll" on our phones—how much time have we wasted on our phones?

Brothers and sisters, we can't prepare the way of the Lord until we *get out of the way* and gracefully get rid of all that is *in the way of the Lord* from dwelling in our hearts and giving us new life. A fundamental truth that we need to remember is that *Christ cannot give us what we don't want*. So if our will is so deeply attached to our favorite sins, and we refuse to let them go, then the Lord will not be able to enter our hearts and transform us by His grace.

But if we allow the Lord to get rid of our sins through His mercy and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, then we will receive all that our Lord wants to give us this Christmas and beyond—a new life of freedom, holiness, and happiness. So on a purely spiritual level, "what do we want for Christmas?" Or in other words, "Lord Jesus, what do You want to give me for Christmas?"