



Prayer of the Month

Almighty and eternal God,
Open my heart to fully receive the gift of your son, Jesus Christ and to let him change my life.

Amen



Parenting Tip of the Month

The greatest gift we are given by God is the presence of His only son, Jesus Christ. To learn more about receiving Jesus well go to:

<http://goo.gl/Pjqifo>



'Tis the Season to Receive

Christmas had to be my mother's favorite holiday. It was so special for her that our house took on the sights and sounds of Christmas during the first week of Advent. The tree went up, the crèche (sans the Baby Jesus) was put on the mantel and the garland of Santas that spelled out "Merry Christmas" was draped between the stockings hung with care.

Soon after the trimming was done, wrapped presents began to randomly appear under the tree. One day, my sister would find a gift tagged for her. The next day there would be one tagged for my brother. Another day, one would arrive tagged for my other sister. My mom never caught on that the randomness with which presents appeared caused great strife amongst her children. We would tease each other mercilessly if we got a present and someone else didn't. Yet, despite the skirmishes, a full complement of gifts would be under the tree by Christmas Eve and every member of our family would be equally gifted.

In the early evening hours of Christmas Eve, my family would gather in the living room and each of us would have our presents placed in front of us. At Mom's command, we would all begin to open our long awaited treasures at the same time. Within a matter of minutes, the floor was covered with ripped wrapping paper, bows and boxes. And, the gift giving was over.

Years later, when I met my future husband, I was invited to spend a Christmas with his family. Following my tradition, I purchased a gift for the future in-laws that I wrapped and tagged. When my beloved picked me up and saw the gift, he scowled and said, "When we get to my house, do not let anyone know you have this gift. Hide it in the closet and make sure you remove the tag that says who it is for". In my head a voice was saying, "This is weird. Who are these people and what is their problem?" But, I did what I was told to do.

Upon entering the house, I saw a Christmas tree beautifully trimmed standing in the corner with only one item sitting below its branches; a humble stable. All the characters (Mary, Joseph, shepherds – the cow, sheep and dog) were placed in waiting. It looked so peaceful and quiet. Yet, in my mind I was wondering, "Where are the gifts? Do these people give gifts?"

My future family gathered that evening; first in prayer, then in merriment during the bountiful meal, and then in reverence as they celebrated the true meaning of Christmas. They sang Christmas carols, blessed the tree and crib after which Baby Jesus was placed in the midst of us all. This simple ritual filled their family room with a gentle holiness. We sat in silence and everyone appeared to be basking in the

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mystery of the Christ child's birth. Everyone that is, but me. My mind was trying to make sense of this new way to celebrate Christmas. A way that did not focus on giving gifts.

Suddenly, my future parents-in-law, got up and left. In the distance, jingle bells began to peel and as they got louder, I could see the eyes of everyone begin to twinkle. *What was going on?* The parents came around the corner, each carrying gifts. Everyone erupted with glee. In fact, I let out a sigh of relief. These people did give gifts! The father walked around the room and as he passed each person he would say, "these gifts are for you". The person he addressed would put out their arms but he would say, "nope, not you"! Moving on to the next person, he would repeat, "these gifts are for you". The same thing would happen. As the anticipation rose, the father finally said to one child, "these gifts are for you" and he placed his gifts in their lap. Everyone watched as the recipient opened the gifts. When all of the gifts were opened and gratefulness expressed, my future mother in law began her "these gifts are for you – oh wait, nope not for you" dance until she found the right person.

It was at this point that my future hubby, leaned in to explain that everyone had exchanged names in secret. One by one, gifts would be given and received. After you received a gift, you would leave the room, get your untagged gifts from your closet and then give them away. He informed me that this ritual would go on for the remainder of the evening.

As the exchange went on amid laughter and stories and true family bonding, I had an epiphany moment. Gifts are meant to be given and received. The best gift exchange happens when both the giving and the receiving are accentuated. If one of these elements is not recognized, the exchange is marginalized. It is something less than it was meant to be. Perhaps, my family's tradition of gift exchange was lacking...

I think you will agree that we spend more time getting ready to give gifts than we do to receive them. We make lists, check them twice. We enter into the hustle and bustle of consumerism for the best deals. We wrap and adorn purchases with bows and tags. We put work and effort into our gift giving. But, what are we doing to prepare ourselves to be great receivers of gifts?

Great reception begins with the understanding that all gifts come from someone. In the case of Christmas, presents are given by someone who loves you. Your reception should acknowledge the person first and the gift second. Even if the gift is not what you want or were expecting, it is important to recognize the person.

Reception is also about taking the time to fully attend to the exchange. Engage the person who is giving the gift. Ask them how they came up with the idea for the gift. Let them know how you will use it. What you say and how you say it is your gift back to the giver.

Waiting is also part of receiving well. In fact, patience breeds gratitude and keeps selfishness at bay. It helps you focus on the true spirit of the exchange rather than on what you are getting. Patience reduces one's sense of entitlement and increases one's appreciation.

As you prepare for the coming of Christmas, set aside time to contemplate ways to receive well the gifts you will be given. Think about those with whom you will celebrate the season and envision the preparation efforts that they will expend in the coming weeks. How will you thank them when you come together? Will you be ready to accept all that they have prepared for you?

One last point – the real reason for this season is the birth of Jesus. He is the ultimate gift of God to us. With his coming the Father will say to us, "this gift is for you". How well will you receive and cherish Him?

Following these recommendations can help your children be better prepared to really learn and develop during their time in school. But this is just a small part of good Catholic parenting. Visit www.twl4parents.com for more strategies for helping your children become the best they can be. And for the best systematic approach to parenting, consider purchasing the Teaching the Way of Love program, which can be found at the same website.

This article series is brought to you by Alice Heinzen and Jeff Arrowood, authors of the Teaching the Way of Love home study series for parents. Find out more at www.twl4parents.com/teaching-the-way-of-love.