

**Homily for Mass and Dedication of New Parish Center / Gym
4th Sunday of Advent
December 21, 2014**

**St. Michael Parish
Sigel, Illinois**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: when I was growing up, my father ran a family pharmacy on the south side of Chicago. With nine children, there seemed always to be somebody available to work in the store which happened to be in the same building in which we lived. Having worked in the store myself, I remember that the busiest day of the year was always Christmas Eve. This is not because more people were sick that time of year, rather, it was because people were doing their last minute Christmas shopping, trying to find a gift or two for somebody in their lives.

Exchanging gifts with others has become a large part of our society's annual observance of Christmas. We like to give gifts to others on important occasions as a token of our love, our gratitude, and our support for those God has placed in our lives. We give gifts on a person's birthday as we celebrate the gift of their life. We give gifts when a couple gets married to assist them as they begin their new life together. When

somebody we know accomplishes something significant, we give them a gift as a form of congratulations for their achievement.

Another example of how we give gifts to others can be seen in the new parish center and gym that we will bless immediately following this Mass. Many people from this parish have shared their gifts for this project so that the people of this parish, both now and in the future, will be able to benefit from the use of this new facility. Your generosity shows the love and dedication that you have for this parish family and your willingness to make a sacrifice so that this parish community will continue to remain strong into the future.

The giving of gifts at Christmas is unique. Everybody participates in giving and receiving gifts on this day, as opposed to other occasions when it is more focused on a single person, or a select group of people, as shown in the examples I have given. One of the ways of understanding this is that the gift of Jesus Christ, who was born on Christmas, was, is, and ever will be a gift for all people. Even though not everybody has or will accept this gift, He has been given to all of mankind nonetheless so that all might have the opportunity for salvation.

It is helpful for us to maintain this perspective when we exchange our gifts for Christmas. Whether we are giving or receiving, each gift should remind us of the most perfect gift of our Savior. As much as we may enjoy the gifts that we receive on Christmas, they should serve to remind us that there is another gift that awaits us, a gift which far exceeds any and every gift that we receive in this life. That gift is eternal life in Heaven, the reward for those who accept Christ into their lives and follow His will.

Since Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ, it would be helpful for us to consider what type of gift we might give to Him in gratitude for the gift of His birth. Trying to figure out what to give somebody for Christmas can often be difficult, but when considering a gift for the Son of God, the task seems all but impossible.

In our first reading for today's Mass, we see King David struggling with this very issue. The Lord had blessed him in many ways and he felt as though he had to give something back to God. He proposes to build a temple for the Lord. David is surprised when the Lord rejects his offer. He responds, instead, by telling David about the house that the Lord will build

for *him*, telling him: “Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever” (2 Samuel 7:16).

In the verses following this promise, King David turns to the Lord and voices a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving as he recognizes that this is the only thing that he can truly give to God in response to the abundant blessings that the Lord had bestowed upon him and his family. He asks the Lord to bless his house that it may remain in God’s presence forever (2 Samuel 7:29), remaining ever faithful to the Lord’s plan for salvation.

The example of King David shows us how to respond when God seems to say ‘no’ to our prayers. When God said ‘no’ to David, David did not pout, he did not turn away from God, nor did he scoff that God’s refusal to give him what he wanted must be proof that there is no God. Instead David responds with a prayer of thanksgiving because God knows our needs better than we do. God says ‘no’ to David’s plan because God has a better plan. Accepting God’s ‘no’ requires as great a faith as carrying out God’s ‘yes,’ but this only makes sense to people of faith. Saint Thomas Aquinas explained this well in his *Summa Theologiae* when he wrote, “To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible!”

The necessary starting point for our gift back to God, then, is to imitate David's prayer of thanksgiving. We are called to express our profound gratitude to God for the many ways He has blessed us, blessings that are both visible and invisible to us. As God, He is not in *need* of anything that we can give to Him. But our gratitude toward Him is important for us, for as we hear in one of the prefaces of the Mass: "For, although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation."¹ This thanksgiving profits us for salvation in that our hearts are more open to remaining in His presence throughout our lives so that we can be found worthy to receive the ultimate gift of everlasting life when we reach the end of our pilgrimage of faith.

Moving from the example of David, we turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary whom we encounter in the Gospel for today's Mass. She shows us how to perfect the gift that we give to her Son for Christmas. When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, he asks Mary to offer a gift to God. That gift is the gift of her very self. Her response to the angel is one that expresses her willingness to offer everything that she has to God as she says:

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

This ‘yes’ of Mary is the verbal expression of her willingness to continue to let her life be guided totally by God’s will. Her welcoming Christ into her life at that moment would be repeated at every other moment of her life as she assented to His will perfectly until the moment she was assumed into Heaven to be united with her Son for all of eternity.

Our gift to Christ is to give Him our ‘yes’ each and every day. It is not enough for us to have said ‘yes’ to Him on the day of our Baptism, or when we renewed those promises at our Confirmation and on every Easter Sunday. We are invited to give that ‘yes’ at every moment of our lives in imitation of Mary. In saying ‘yes’ to His will, we do not have to understand it perfectly. We give our assent to Him, trusting in those words given to Mary by the angel, words that are given to us as well, that “nothing will be impossible for God” (Luke 1:37).

In a very tangible way, we are to give the gift of our ‘yes’ to Christ by accepting Him as He comes to us in others. As He Himself tells us in Matthew’s Gospel: “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). One of the great gifts that we give

to Christ whom we cannot see is by loving our neighbor whom we can see. As the Lord reminds us, our neighbor is not just that person with whom we agree or with whom we like to spend time, but it includes everybody, *especially* those with whom we find it hard to get along.² We may even encounter some of those people in the midst of our family celebrations for Christmas. What a wonderful gift we can give to Christ by treating them with respect and love.

As we enter these final days of preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord, Christ prepares to come among us now in a remarkable way in the Eucharist. May we be thankful for this gift which we are about to receive from His love for us. May that love enflame our hearts to give the gift of ourselves to Christ this Christmas, gratefully accepting His will for us at every stage of our journey and welcoming Him as He comes to us in those He has placed into our lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Common Preface IV

² Luke 6:27-36.