

Each Christmas, a faint recollection comes to me of standing with my grandmother and mother, in the midst of a crowd, as we waited to view the Nativity scene at Holy Family Church. My dad who went to an earlier Mass watched my younger siblings at home, so this one-on-one time for this six-year-old already constituted a special memory in the making. However, what stands out even more clearly is my mom's "seizing the moment" as a teachable one as she prepared me for "our turn."

As I held her hand, she leaned over and whispered, "Think of a gift* that you want to give to the Baby Jesus. When we get to the manger, tell him (silently of course), and take a small piece of straw to remind you of this promise until next Christmas."

I did as instructed. Then we took my rosary case out of my "church" pocketbook and slipped the straw into its plastic sleeve (which also held a piece of paper that identified me as a Catholic and to call a priest in case of an emergency!) In essence, my mom put a positive spin on my prayer of personal need as a gift akin to the order of the Magi. In a very simple yet profound way, she promoted my spiritual journey with the Christ-child throughout the year and beyond.

Life constantly throws challenges at us which often cloud and even hinder thoughts of our "interior manglers" which cradle Christ-child within. At Christmas time, a season of joy, the loss of loved ones, trying diagnoses and illnesses, worry about family members, etc. magnify themselves and can try one's soul. And, yes, the last two years placed exceptional stresses and anxiety upon us and it continues as the coronavirus once again raises its ugly head with its surging numbers. Bethlehem with its harsh cold and raw environment still lives and unduly affects us. And we would find company even among the greatest of saints.

Bethlehem, also, birth God upon that straw in the manger... and as believers, our spiritual GPS takes us to this "part of town!" It can be very difficult to let go and let God, but with God's abundant love and grace, it is the difference in the saint making process! It allows for us to stand before the manger, offer the beautiful gift of our God within, our Imago Christi, and then take a piece of straw (most likely spiritually these days!) for a surge of peace and joy for the journey.

Please know that this is my Christmas prayer (and one of gratitude) for you and yours. And may the Prince of Peace bring that great joy and peace to you during this special and holy season and beyond....

*And ...Just for the record... I had received my very first report card and did not do so well in "self-control," thus, "my gift to you, Baby Jesus, is to be the best I can be in school." My mark did improve (at least, for the next marking period!)

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for us.

Ann