

Today's Feast of the Epiphany brings to my mind the story of St. Lawrence. Lawrence was one of the early martyrs of the Church. He was a deacon of the church in Rome during the reign of Pope Sixtus - yes, that Sixtus--"Linus, Cletus, Clement, *Sixtus*." During this time, the pagan prefect of Rome was persecuting the Church. He ordered that Pope Sixtus be executed and afterward, thinking that Christians were hoarding treasure, he demanded that Lawrence bring him the treasures of the Church. Lawrence promised the prefect that after three days he would bring him the Church's treasures. He then went around the city, gathering the poor and the sick to whom he ministered regularly, and on the third day he presented them to the prefect, saying, "This is the Church's treasure."

On this feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate the arrival of the Magi at Bethlehem. You likely noticed the wise men who were added to our Nativity Scene in the gathering space, with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They gave gold to honor His kingship. Frankincense, used for burning in prayer, honored His divinity. And myrrh, a resin used in burial wrappings, foretold His saving death for us. Beyond this deeper meaning that God had in mind when He inspired the wise men to bring those specific gifts, we know that these gifts were extremely valuable. They were gifts used to honor kings and deities.

Most people forget what the Magi did *before* presenting their gifts. They prostrated themselves at the feet of the infant Jesus and His mother! They laid *themselves* down as offerings first. This self-offering is even more apparent in their actions after encountering Jesus. Instead of complying with the murderous king Herod, they return home by a different path after being warned in a dream. Their lives are changed by their encounter with the Lord. They give themselves to Him, and now everything is new. Their travels, even their lives, have new direction.

Think back now on the story of St. Lawrence. He was not just being obtuse with the prefect of Rome. The people who make up the body of Christ really

*are* the true treasure of the Church! Each and every one of us is a treasure in the eyes of God, worth infinitely more than anything else. Like the Magi, each of us is called to lay ourselves before the King of the Universe. This is the primary offering that Jesus desires. Before anything else we could say, do, or give, Jesus simply wants *us*. Before all else, the Church is a kingdom of love, where our King wants to rule in our hearts and minds and lead us to live in His love.

The question for you and me is, “Am I really laying myself down? Am I really putting Jesus ahead of all else in my life so that I can become who He made me to be?”

As Christians, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that just because we give to the Church of our time, talent and treasure, that we are checking the box and doing what we’re supposed to do. But that is not the full picture. Of course, we deeply appreciate your generosity in these areas, but let’s not put the cart before the horse.

The temptation for us is to give *things* without really giving *ourselves*. But in the grand scheme of things, the latter is much more foundational and important. The more fully we give ourselves to God, the more He leads us to the best, most practical ways to give of our time, talent and treasure.

Whatever may be keeping us from more fully putting ourselves in service to Jesus, let us pray for the grace to leave it behind. Today, let us think of one practical way to more fully give our lives to the Lord and work on doing that for the next month. You have probably already broken your New Year’s resolution, so why not try something else for the next month? All of us can expect great things when we do this. The gift of ourselves is something powerful in the hands of God.

*I pray: Come Holy Spirit, set our hearts on fire with love for God, that we might be more fully given to Him. Show us, Holy Spirit, how to more fully*

*give our lives to the Father. Let our love for Him be the guiding force in our lives, that all of our actions and words might lead others to Jesus and make Him more known in our hurting world. Amen.*