

Who doesn't love receiving gifts, especially on Christmas?

Undoubtedly one of the joys of Christmas, especially for children, is the reception of gifts. There is something so beautiful in a child's desire for gifts and their ability to receive and accept gifts. I would argue that there is a lot we as adults can learn from a child's receptivity, especially when it comes to gifts. In fact, children *themselves* are gifts who are meant to be received with an open and joyful heart. Children are meant to be cherished as precious gifts from God and they can teach us so much through their innocence and purity if we only listen to them and are attentive to their wisdom.

There's no doubt in my mind that because of a child's innate receptivity and their ability to accept gifts, our Lord Jesus holds children up as models of faith and holiness for all of us when He says in the Gospel of Mark 10:15: "Amen, I say to you, whoever does not *accept the kingdom of God like a child* will not enter it." In the Gospel of Matthew 18:3-5, our Lord teaches: "Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom

of heaven. And whoever *receives* one child such as this in my name receives me.” Brothers and sisters, do we have the heart of a child that is receptive and lovingly open to all that God wants to give us this Christmas and beyond?

It’s no coincidence that on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, right before Christmas, the Church places before us today’s Gospel from Luke recounting the mysterious event of the Annunciation, in which the Angel Gabriel appears to a teenage Jewish girl in Nazareth named Mary, and invites Her to become the Mother of God, which is the greatest title given to any woman. The Annunciation itself is all about *receptivity* and Mary’s faithful desire to *accept* all that God is about give her.

Indeed, God gives Mary the *Greatest Gift He can give—the Gift of Himself—the Gift of His Beloved Son*. Mary’s desire to *receive* God into her being and her willingness to accept her role as the Mother of God is nothing short of exemplary. Mary is so humbled and overjoyed by this extraordinary divine Gift that she declares, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”

Our Blessed Mother Mary, as the first and greatest disciple of

Christ, is the perfect model of human receptivity. Remember, even though Mary was the Mother of God, she herself was *not* God, and so she had no knowledge of what the future held for her or her betrothed Joseph. For Mary and Joseph, our Lord Jesus was a certainly an unplanned and unexpected pregnancy and so it's worth noting that in essence, all of humanity was saved by an unplanned and unexpected pregnancy.

Even though Mary didn't know what the future held for her and Joseph, out of a pure love for God, *she still said yes* and humbly accepted the saving will of the Lord. Borne out of her faith, hope, and love, she was *willing to receive all that God wanted to give her*. Mary's emphatic, child-like "yes" to God the Father in receiving the vocation to be the Mother of God the Son is truly an example for all of us.

So if I had to summarize today's Gospel with one word, it would be "receptivity." The great Dominican theologian Jean Corbon eloquently declared that, "the most fruitful human activity is to receive God." And I would add that true happiness is rooted in the reception of God, Who is Perfect Love and Goodness Itself.

So on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we have to ask ourselves: are we willing to become like little children, to become like Mary, and receive Christ into our hearts this Christmas and beyond so that He can transform us forever? And remember, our Lord Jesus is a package deal—when we receive Him, we're blessed to receive His Church, our Mother, Who teaches, guides, and sanctifies us in His name through the Holy Spirit. When we receive Jesus, we receive all of the crosses and suffering that comes along with following Him and loving Him as our Savior. When we receive Jesus, we're invited to love Him in return and therefore reject and renounce all of the sins and false gods that destroy us and enslave us in misery and emptiness.

So on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, are we open and prepared to receive the greatest Gift of all, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our eternal Hope and Salvation? Are we eager like children—like children before Christmas morning—to receive the new life, the freedom, the happiness, the peace, and the grace that Christ wants to give us, especially through His Church and Her sacraments?

Or are we closed off to Him and stuck in our usual and tired patterns of sin and discouragement that imprison us? With the pandemic going on, there's all this talk about lockdowns, shutdowns, and restrictions—well are we restricting ourselves in a negative way that closes us off to Christ? Are we imposing a spiritual lockdown on our hearts and minds and closing ourselves off to Christ and the new life of holiness He wants to give us? Are we shutting down ourselves in a way that prevents us from receiving Christ and His mercy, forgiveness, and healing? Are we spiritually *open* to Christ and all that He wants do for us and give to us in the Holy Spirit? Or are we just going through the motions and checking off the boxes?

We all love receiving gifts, especially at Christmas. Our Heavenly Father is the greatest gift-Giver and His Son Jesus is the greatest Gift we can receive in the Holy Spirit! As we prepare to worship and receive our merciful Savior in the Most Holy Eucharist, let's thank Him for all that He is and all that He wants to give us now, at Christmas, and beyond, always maintaining that child-like receptivity—the receptivity of our Blessed Mother Mary, through whom we received our Savior.