



Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

The Holy Gift Exchange

I envision a particular pair of size 11 cowboy boots this Christmas. This species of boot has a throwback 1960s look, with colorful two-toned leather (including turquoise, of course), very pointed in the toe, and worn-in enough to be comfortable (or as comfortable as cowboy boots can be). But these are not just any pair one can find on eBay or Amazon or your local second-hand store. Boots like these are only available through my family's White Elephant gift exchange—and which have been re-gifted for decades.

For any who are not familiar with the Christmas "White Elephant Gift Exchange," it most often consists of a group of friends or family wrapping up items that they no longer want—gag gifts, hard-to-dispose of items, or gaudy goods (like 1960's cowboy boots)—and exchanging and trading among themselves.

Even though the White Elephant exchange is meant mostly for fun and entertainment, it represents only one of many ways we have come to this almost-essential aspect of Christmas: gift-giving. Some families draw names, while workplaces and schools have "Secret Santa." Grandparents, of course, play by their own rules.

But amidst the papers and boxes and ribbons is another more fundamental gift exchange that is the Gold Standard of all other methods of Christmas gift giving, one that should be recalled whenever and however we pass gifts between ourselves.

We first hear about this tremendous trade not on Black Friday, but during the weekdays leading up to Christmas. With December 17, the Church shifts Advent into high gear, and her run-up to Christmas sounds a different tone. When December 17 falls on a weekday (in 2017 it fell on a Sunday), we ask God the Father in the Opening Prayer that his "Only Begotten Son, having taken to Himself our humanity, may be pleased to grant us a share in His divinity." The Mass during Christmas day will pray similarly: "O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity." In fact, at any Mass, the deacon or priest will say similar words as he pours the water

(which represents you and me) into the wine (which symbolizes Jesus) as he prepares the chalice: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share in our humanity."

This swap of divinity and humanity is one definitely worth sharing in—no need to keep the gift receipt or stand in line at the gift counter to return.

Giving and receiving of humanity and divinity is not, of course, a type of White Elephant exchange, or Secret Santa exchange, or family gift exchange. It's called the "holy exchange." St. Augustine tells us just what this exchange means: with the Incarnation and birth of Jesus, "He effected a wonderful exchange with us, through mutual sharing: we gave him the power to die, He will give us the power to live." (I think we're getting the better end of this deal!)

The Prayer over the Offerings at Christmas Midnight Mass asks that "through this most holy exchange we may be found in the likeness of Christ, in whom our nature is united." One of the Mass' Preface texts (coming just prior to the Holy, holy, holy) recounts that "through Him the holy exchange that restores our life has shone forth today in splendor: when our frailty is assumed by Your Word not only does human mortality receive unending honor but by this wondrous union we, too, are made eternal." Christmas gives to Jesus mortality—and to us eternity.

So whether it's giving gift cards, receiving socks and sweaters, or—if you have been especially good this year—the slickest pair of sixties boots imagination can invent, let them all remind us of that ultimate Christmas exchange: life in place of death, joy instead of sorrow, God's divinity added to our humanity. Gifts like these will guarantee a Merry Christmas for all.

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