

God's Vessels
January 11, 2024

As we conclude the Christmas season with the feast of the Epiphany and the baptism of Jesus, many of us embrace a new year with reflection and resolutions for self-betterment. I would like to bridge both of these milestones in this teaching.

First, I want to begin with the beautiful words of the St. Andrew Christmas Novena:
“Hail and blessed be the hour and the moment in which the son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in piercing cold. In that hour, vouchsafe, O my God! To hear my prayer and grant my desires through the merits of our savior, Jesus Christ, and of his blessed mother, Amen.” (Christmasnovena.com)

One of the most beautiful meanings of Christmas is captured in a children's book titled, *The Sparkle Box*, written by Jill Hardie. In this book, a young boy named Sam can't wait for Christmas. He eagerly anticipates parties, food, and especially presents. After decorating the tree, Sam asks his mom about a sparkly box on the mantle next to the creche. His mom says it is a special gift called a sparkle box. She tells him they will open it together later, but first they need to fill it. The book continues with Sam helping his mom deliver food and blankets to a building he had never visited. His mom explained they were for people who don't have food to eat or blankets to keep them warm. On their ride home, Sam noticed a man sleeping on a park bench out in the cold weather and his mom told him perhaps that man will use the supplies they just delivered. Sam felt sad for the man who didn't have a home. When they arrived home, Sam had a snack by the warm fire and asked his mom if there is anything in the sparkle box. I just put something in it today, but it is still not ready to be opened yet, she said. Sam wondered what was inside the box. At his dad's office Christmas party, the children enjoyed a huge spread of food and gifts. His dad thanked all of the employees for coming and explained that they were blessed when so many people lacked something as basic of clean water to drink. The employees had made donations to a village in Africa to provide a well for clean drinking water! They had added another item to the sparkle box. A few days later, the anticipation was palpable as Sam shopped with his mom to buy mittens for the mitten tree at school. Donations would be shared with those who needed them. Sam purchased the largest pair of mittens he could find and a candy bar with his own money. As they went to leave the store, the homeless man from the park walked into the store. Sam put the candy bar into the bag with the mittens and gave them to the man. His mom was very proud of him. Another item for the sparkle box. Christmas morning FINALLY arrived! Sam was eager to open his presents, but he was most curious about the sparkle box. Inside the box were just a few pieces of paper and on them were written: warm blankets and food for the homeless, a well in Africa to provide clean drinking water, and mittens and a candy bar given to someone in need. Sam looked at his parents confused. His mom explained that the sparkle box is our gift to Jesus on Christmas Day, his birthday. Sam questioned her, but we didn't give them to Jesus, we gave those things to people in need. She smiled back at him. Yes, and no gift could make Jesus happier. He taught us that whatever we do for people in need, we do for Him. (Matthew 25:40).

May we never forget the true reason for this season! It is truly how we live our lives that shows glory to God. That transitions nicely to the many new year resolutions so many people declare—

unfortunately, they are often elusive aspirational goals of things we seek to change about ourselves. Og Mandino, author of *A Better Way to Live*, advises that we are creatures of God and we have the power to achieve any dream. He tells us to count our blessings because once we realize how valuable we are and how much we have going for us, we will finally be able to move forward in the life God intended for us with grace, strength, courage, and confidence. (p. 53). Realize true happiness lies within you. Waste no time and effort searching for peace, contentment or joy in the world. There is no happiness in getting or having, but only in giving. Reach out. Share. Smile. Hug. Happiness is a perfume you cannot pour on others without getting a few drops on yourself (p. 125). Treat everyone you meet, friend or foe, loved one or stranger, no matter how trivial the contact, all the care and kindness and understanding and love that you can muster, and do it with no thought of any reward. Your life will never be the same (p. 95).

You see, the key is that we are God's vessels (Romans 9:21) and 2 Timothy 2:21 says, "So if anyone cleanses himself of what is unfit, he will be a vessel for honor: sanctified, useful to the Master, and prepared for every good work." 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 teaches, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies."

We should live each day for the glory of God. Do everything out of love. Act with love, compassion, mercy and kindness as often as you can. 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 tells us, "Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong and do everything with love." I came across so many resources recently with this same message: You will never feel as fulfilled as when you are serving other people in some way. Give food. Give money. Give away a possession. Give time. Give encouragement. Give a hug. Give of yourself. You won't regret this kind of living. Remember that this life is short. (Catholic.org daily inspiration, date unknown.) I knew this is the message the Lord was asking me to share with all of you tonight. The key to a vessel is that it is a medium of service and we cannot serve without being in some relationship—relationship with God and relationship with one another. Susan Pinker's research told us that if we want to live to be 100, what really matters most significantly above all other things is social integration and personal relationships. I will spend the remainder of this teaching sharing some of those inspirational quotes I came across in the interest of a new year's outlook and how we may best honor God as His vessels.

Psalm 100: "Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands! Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the Lord, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations."

Mary Southerland: "Knowledge – for the sake of knowledge – is worthless and can easily lead to pride and arrogance. But knowledge for the sake of love is priceless. In other words, no one really cares how much you know until they know how much you really care."

Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."

Matthew 7:7-8: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Mark Twain: “Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great [people] make you feel that you, too, can become great. When you are seeking to bring big plans to fruition, it is important with whom you regularly associate. Hang out with friends who are like-minded and who are also designing purpose-filled lives. Similarly, be that kind of a friend to your friends.”

Melanie Koulouris: “Life is short. We spend so much time sweating the small stuff; worrying, complaining, gossiping, comparing, wishing, wanting and waiting for something bigger and better instead of focusing on all the simple blessings that surround us every day. Life is so fragile and all it takes is a single moment to change everything you take for granted. Focus on what’s important and be grateful! You are blessed! Believe it! Live your life and leave no regrets.”

Brene Brown: “Wishing you a heart open enough to stay curious, strong enough to face pain, and brave enough to feel joy.”

Louise May: “Deep at the center of my being there is an infinite well of love. I now allow this love to flow to the surface. It fills my heart, my body, my mind, my consciousness, my very being and radiates out from me in all directions and returns to me multiplied. The more love, I use and give, the more I have to give. The supply is endless. The use of love makes me feel good. It is an expression of my inner joy. I love myself, therefore I take loving care of my body. I lovingly feed it nourishing foods and beverages. I lovingly groom it and dress it, and my body lovingly responds to me with vibrant health and energy. I love myself, therefore I provide myself a comfortable home; one that fills all my needs and is a pleasure to be in. I fill the rooms with the vibration of love so that all who enter -including myself- will feel this love and be nourished by it. I love myself, therefore I work at a job I truly enjoy doing- one that uses my creative talents and abilities- working with and for people that I love and that love me, and earning a good income. I love myself, therefore I behave and think in a loving way to all people- for I know that which I give out returns to me multiplied. I only attract loving people in my world for they are a mirror of what I am. I love myself, therefore I forgive and totally release the past and all past experiences and I am free. I love myself, therefore I live totally in the now experiencing each moment as good and knowing that my future is bright and joyous and secure- for I am a beloved child of [God], and [God] takes care of me now and forevermore.” *Heal your Body.*

C.S. Lewis: “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

Matthew 5:16: “Just so, your life must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”

Finally, a closing prayer from Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta from her book, *A Simple Path*. She implores us to pray often each day because “Prayer makes the heart large enough until it can contain God’s gift of Himself. Ask and seek, and your heart will grow big enough to receive Him and keep Him as your own. Let us all become a true and fruitful branch on the vine Jesus, by accepting Him in our lives as it pleases Him to come” (p. 35).

Let us pray,

“O God, we believe you are here. We adore and love you with our whole heart and soul because you are most worthy of all our love. We desire to love you as the Blessed do in Heaven. We adore all the designs of Your Divine Providence resigning ourselves entirely to Your Will. We also love our neighbor for your sake as we love ourselves. We sincerely forgive all who have injured us, and ask pardon for all we have injured. Dear Jesus, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being, so utterly, that our lives may only be a radiance of Yours. Shine through us, and so be in us, that every soul we come in contact with may feel Your presence in our soul. Let them look up and see no longer us, but only Jesus! Stay with us, and then we may begin to shine as You shine; so to shine as to be a light to others. The light O Jesus will be all from You, none of it will be ours; it will be You, shining on others through us. Let us thus praise You in the way You love best by shining on those around us. Let us preach You without preaching, not by word but by our example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear to You. Amen.” (Ibid. pp. 36-37).