

One of the tasks of Christmas for most of us is buying presents for family. I usually don't like shopping, but Christmas shopping can be different. In the past, I've tried to be the Fun Uncle. With my older two nephews I tried to buy them creative, "eyes-light up" Christmas presents – like the water-propelled rockets, the radio controlled pick-up truck, or the politically incorrect foam-tipped dart Gatling gun. My sister-in-law never really approved of that gift, but what's not to like about being able to pick off your little brother or the dog from 50 feet? But now they are 16 and 14 and all they want are video games and clothes! I know my nephew and I are both getting older because this year I found myself shopping for a SWEATER for him, of all things! I guess you're not really old until you buy a sweater for your teenage nephew. Fortunately, I snapped out of it and got him a morally unobjectionable video game he wanted – but the days of the Fun Uncle are passing.

But there are still my younger nephew and niece. They are in first and fourth grade respectively. Buying Christmas presents for them still means going to the toy store. That can be a rejuvenating experience. My little nephew wanted a motorized train set. Now that was something I could get excited about. I walked down the aisles of toys thinking, "Would I want this?" I saw there the exact plastic model airplane kits I used to build as a kid 40 years ago. It brought back memories and feelings from my own childhood, of what it was like to yearn for marvelous things that were within reach at Christmas time. I think there is something at work in such feelings in us adults at this time of the year, which speaks to the true nature of Christmas – and Christianity.

You have heard it said that Christmas brings out the child in all of us. I believe that is truer than we know. But it is not Christmas the holiday -- which has many shabby features -- that captures the essence of childhood for us. It is not the buying or the giving of gifts, the feasting or reunions that satisfy our longing. It took a child who was also God to do that. It is Christ who brings out the child in us.

We take the value and graces of childhood for granted, but before Christianity the pagan world never perceived the beauty of childhood. Before the Christ-child, "Child" in the Greek and Roman world equaled imperfection, and childhood was a brief stage on the journey to full humanity. Only after God became a child did we discover the reasons to treasure that experience.

"Unless you be converted and become as little children you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." To be Christ's follower is to be a child because every child knows what it is to gaze upon the world with new eyes and hope, and engage that world in play. These childhood experiences open one to Christ, who came to make all things new.

For Christ's true disciple -- no matter what his or her age, as for a child, everything is promise, and life is bathed in a transfiguring light. Once upon a time we saw the world in this light (think about how you felt as a child at Christmas). But for most of us this light slowly fades through life. And we excuse this decay by calling it maturity and reality, rather than sin and hardness of heart.

But we feel homesick for what we once saw, and we may still occasionally catch glimpses of God and that youthful joy in poetry, music, nature, or remembered childhood experiences. This season is particularly rich in providing access to God through memories of

Christmas past, brought to mind whenever we buy Christmas presents for those we love, hear a certain Christmas carol, or smell a noble fir. These contacts with Christ rejuvenate us, literally make us young again.

This youthfulness which Christ gave His Church has nothing to do with our worship of a false-youth so common in modern society. Youth cannot be retained, or regained, by a younger spouse, cosmetic surgery or a sports car. It is a tragedy of this society that we worship such childishness while we lose, in our loss of faith in the Messiah who never knew old age, our only hope for the childlike wonder we truly long for.

Christian newness is founded on the Person of Christ, the eternity who broke into time at the first Christmas. He is the only real fountain of youth. This true youthfulness of the Word made flesh is found in the saints – those filled with God. It not a matter of chronology. A saint, no matter what his or her age, is a champion who gathers together and leads the youth of the world.

Wrinkled Bl. Teresa of Calcutta led into the slums of the world 4,000 young sisters most of whom were in their twenties and thirties. Bl. John Paul II, crippled with Parkinsons disease, and 85 year-old Benedict XVI, have gathered and held in rapt attention hundreds of thousands of kids from around the world, who loved them because they could speak to their young hearts.

We gain such vitality from Christ, who is eternally young. He does not simply put one into an enthusiastic mood, which will pass away. He gives that Spirit who makes all things new. He is behind what we call the “magic of Christmas” that grants for us who are no longer children the sight of a child’s eyes.

Don't let this opportunity slip by. On this night/day when the light of childhood shines briefly again, pray to Christ the child, and give your heart to Him and ask that you may not withdraw from Him once more with the passing of Christmas. We may be happy or sad tonight/today. We may be lonely or in love. But because Jesus was born for us we can all hope to be rejuvenated by the God who became a child. So to all here on this Christmas Eve/Day who are old . . . old of heart, old by fear, old through suffering bourn long, old in body, "I proclaim to you good news of great joy . . . today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Our Savior is a child. And in that child we can be reborn. And in that young life we will discover an eternal life that will never grow old.