

Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord
Tuesday, December 24, 2013
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

Merry Christmas, children! Yes, this is a Christmas podcast for children, so today I'm talking to you. The grown-ups can listen if they want to. Now, what is the first thing that children think of at Christmas? Probably presents -- both giving presents and getting them -- because when it comes to presents, Christmas is just about the best time of year there is. Christmas gets pretty exciting -- so exciting that it can be hard to sleep at night.

There was once a boy called Ronald Knox who grew up to be a famous priest. When he was little, he found it very hard to sleep at night. When he was four years old, a grown-up asked him what he did at night when he couldn't sleep. He told her, "I just lie there and think about the past." So maybe if you have a hard time sleeping tonight, you could think about the past -- especially about the best presents you can remember from the past.

I got a lot of great presents when I was little. Of course my little brothers broke most of them. The present I remember most of all was a very little thing. Whenever my father came back from a business trip, or my parents came home from going out for dinner, I would run up to them and ask, "What did you bring me." And they always had something for me. It was usually a little thing, like a piece of candy, or some chop sticks, or a paper umbrella from a fancy drink. I didn't care what it was. I guess I just wanted proof that they were thinking of me when they were

away. I put all these treasures in a metal box on the shelf in my closet.

One day Mom and Dad came home from a Chinese restaurant. As usual I ran up to them and said “What did you bring me?” My father reached into his pocket and handed me a little clam. At least it was a clam shell. It wasn’t heavy enough for there to be a live clam inside, and it had a little sticker on it that said made in China. I said thank you, and I was running away to put it in my treasure box, but my Father called me back, and told me to get some water in a clear glass.

I got the glass of water and put it on the kitchen table. Then my Father told me to drop the clam in the water. So I did, and it sank to the bottom of the glass, and I watched it. At first it just sat there. Then some little bubbles came out of it. And then something strange happened. The clam opened up all by itself, and some sparkles came out of it, and then some colorful streamers and tiny paper flowers, and then the whole glass was full of beautiful colors. It was amazing and mysterious to me that an ordinary little brown clam could change into something so wonderful. It felt like magic. I guess that was my best present ever.

It was a bit like the first time you play with a Transformer. At first it’s just a little car, or truck or spaceship. But then you turn a few of the parts, and suddenly it’s a robot. It’s exciting and magical when something that seems ordinary turns into something wonderful.

The greatest present in the history of the world was something like that. Of course the greatest present in the history of the world was a person -- that baby in the manger you see in nativity sets, or rather the person that baby represents: Jesus, God’s gift to each one of us, and to the whole world.

When Jesus was born, he seemed like just another baby born into an unhappy world. But it turned out that there was something wonderful and mysterious about him. Along with being a human baby, he was also God's own Son, and by coming into the world he changed the world forever. He transformed the world. He filled the world with joy, and peace and love and hope. And that's why we celebrate his birthday every year on the day we call Christmas.

If you were to ask your Mother and Father what was their favorite gift of all time, they might get all romantic and say it was each other, or they might be honest and admit it was you. You are God's special gift to them and to all of us. And like that strange Chinese clam that I dropped into a glass of water, and like baby Jesus himself, there is something amazing and mysterious and wonderful about you.

Even though you might seem quite ordinary on the outside, and even though you might be kind of horrible at times, when you were born, God filled you up with lots of special gifts. There are all sorts of wonderful possibilities built into you -- talents and grace and beauty and courage and kindness. And as you get older we grown-ups are amazed to watch these wonders unfold and blossom in you.

Your job is to be thankful for these gifts, and learn how to use them with love. That's the best present you can give to the people who love you, and the best present you can give to Jesus on his birthday.