

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Recently I came across an old legend about three men, each carrying two knapsacks. One sack was tied in front and rested on his chest, the other rested on his back.

When the first man was asked what was in his knapsacks, he said, “In the sack on my back are all the good things friends and family have done for me. That way they’re hidden from view. In the front sack are all the bad things that have happened to me and all the mistakes I have made. Every now and then I stop, open the front sack—containing all the bad things have happened to me—take the things out, examine them, and think about them.” Because he stopped so much to concentrate on all the bad stuff in his life, his pace was slow and he made little progress.

When the second man was asked about his sacks, he replied in exactly an opposite way. “In the front sack are all the good things that have happened to me. I like to see them, so quite often I take them out to show them off to people and reminisce about the great moments and good people who have made up my life. I keep all my regrets and mistakes in the sack on my back and carry them all of the time. Sure they’re heavy. They slow me down, but you know, for some reason I can’t put them down.”

When the third man was asked about his knapsacks, he answered in a slightly different way. “The sack in front is where I keep all the blessings I’ve experienced—all the great things people have done for me, the blessings I’ve received, remembering the good that I’ve tried to do. The weight isn’t a problem. In fact, it keeps me moving forward. As for the second sack on my back, it’s empty. There’s nothing in it. I cut a big hole in the bottom.

Then I collected all my regrets and all my mistakes from the past and put them in that knapsack. They go in the top and fall right out the bottom. They don’t weigh me down and I can keep moving forward.”

Maybe the beginning of this New Year would be a good time to take a look in the sacks that we are carrying. If the one we are carrying on our chests that hold all our hurts, regrets, mistakes, and failures, this might is a good time to strap it to our backs. But before we do, cut a big hole in the bottom so they no longer weigh us down.

It’s great that this first Sunday of the New Year marks the Feast of the Epiphany, the day that we celebrate three wise men or kings or magi, which simply means persons of greatness, following a distant light to find the newborn king of the Jews, the Christ.

The word, Epiphany, means a moment in which a new realization has been achieved; an awareness or a knowledge of something, after which events are thrown into a new light. Many of us have had life-changing epiphanies.

Today I'd like to share with you a few of the epiphanies in my life that have led me to seek the Christ with the hope of prompting you to reflect on the epiphanies in your own lives.

The first epiphany I've shared with you many times. It was the prayerfulness of my parents. Since my bedroom was right across the hall from my parents' bedroom, I became aware that there was never a night that I was awake that I didn't see them kneel down together to say their prayers before they got in bed. It didn't have a big impact on me at the time, but years later I realized I never heard my parents raise their voices to each other. I never saw or heard them fight with each other.

I believe their daily praying together not only led me to the priesthood, but had a tremendous impact on the lives of my sisters. My oldest sister, Margaret Mary, and her husband, Andy, after 57 years of marriage, still pray the Rosary together and the Liturgy of the Hours together every day. Louise, who just lost her husband, George, 8 months after losing Robert, the second of her seven children, still goes to daily Mass and spends at least one hour a week in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Rather than being mournful or depressed, she speaks of her peace, knowing that they are with God. Gerri, my younger sister, who can no longer go to church, prays the Rosary several times a day she says because on each bead she prays for someone she knows needs it and so she has to pray the Rosary at least three times a day. The Epiphany that led my family to seek Christ was the simple nightly prayer of our parents. Of course, we didn't realize it at the time, but what a powerful impact their prayerfulness had on us!

Another of the great epiphanies of my life was meeting, coming to know, and work with a powerful, little African-American woman named Anna Brown. While I studied the Scriptures and Theology in the Seminary for ten long years, it was Anna Brown who opened me to the joy of the Gospel and taught me to love the Lord and His People above all else. This mother of six who lived in poverty most of her life loved the Lord with such enthusiasm that I wanted that same shameless, reckless abandon in my spiritual journey.

Perhaps the greatest epiphany in my life these past many years is you, the holy people of God. To experience your goodness through all kinds of trials and tribulations; to know your striving to do good especially when it is most difficult; to see your generosity to the Church, and especially for the needs of the poor, has been the light that leads me always to the Christ. By way of example, last week a teen who had been through a difficult time, came to see me. We greeted each other with a hug, spoke briefly for a moment of God's love, and just spent a little time in each other's company. We didn't talk much, but I experienced Christ drawing us into a deeper bond through his enormous love. That was an epiphany of the light of Christ in my life, and, I hope, in his.

So, I invite each of you this morning to reflect on the epiphanies of Christ in your own lives. Hear Isaiah speak to your hearts, “Rise up in splendor...your light has come. The glory of the Lord shines upon you.” And don’t forget, cut a hole in that sack on your back and let all the hurts, regrets, mistakes, and failures of the past fall away and focus on the light of the blessings you have and those that are to come as you follow it to Christ.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!