Christmas Eve 1993
GOD'S PERSONAL GIFT

Have you noticed that beginning with early fall each year, a new season of words begins, both written and spoken? The mail swells in volume, with fat and thin catalogs thumping into the mailbox. Newspapers and magazines thicken. A multitude of new books appear in bookstores. Advertisements grow more insistent. Everything seems bent on squeezing itself into language. We no longer have typewriters, but word processors. Fax machines carry our written words instantly to another location.

In a technical sense, it has become a lot easier to put our thoughts and ideas into words and to transmit them to anyone, anywhere in the world. But to turn words into flesh, to turn words into action, is another matter. It's easy to talk about love in words, whether written or spoken, but to act in a loving way toward another is something else entirely.

We've all felt the frustration of Eliza in the musical My Fair Lady. After dealing with nothing but words from people all around her, she finally cries out in exasperation: "Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words. I get words all day through, first from him, now from you. Is that all you blighters can do?" Then she goes on to sing one of the most beautiful songs in the musical, "Don't talk of stars burning above, if you're in love, show me."

That's what God did in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem — God showed us! "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Or to translate it another way, "The love of God became a human being and lived among us. And this same love of God continues to live among us — and in us. It's God's very personal gift."

Words are wonderful. Words are important. The right words at the right time, lovingly spoken, can make all the difference in the world.

A man who was married to a very loving wife for thirty-seven years came home from work to find that his wife had suffered a massive stroke that day. She was rushed to the hospital, but in spite of the best medical care, she died a few hours later. After the funeral, the husband, in shock and grief, told his best friend, "Do you know what the worst thing of all is about her death? I loved her more than anyone in this whole world, and I never told her or showed her how deep and abiding my love for her was."

The most personal gift God has given us is God's self-disclosure. When someone asks me, "How can I know what God is like?" My usual answer is: "Look at Jesus. Look at how he was born. Look at the way he lived his life and gave it for others. Study his teachings. Then you will know in the most personal way possible what God is like."

Christmas is, above all, God's self-disclosure. What are some of the implications of this self-disclosure of God through God's very personal gift?

First of all, it means that God's presence is among us and in us in a new, additional, and wonderful way. Until the birth of Jesus, people experienced and knew God primarily through God's laws and through the teachings of the prophets. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament puts it this way: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various

ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."

This personal gift of God to us in a human being adds another dimension to our understanding of God. It means we can live with meaning and serenity even under the worst of circumstances because God is present with us in all of our human affairs. As St. Paul put it, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Secondly, God's very personal gift to us in the person of Jesus means that we live in one realm, not two. We keep trying to divide the world into two parts — the religious, which includes the spiritual, and the secular, which includes what we call the material.

We like to talk about withdrawing now and then from the secular world to enter the world of the spiritual in order to become more inspired and fortified. However, to say that God became a human being in the baby Jesus means that all of creation is one. The spiritual and the material, the secular and the religious, are simply two different ways of talking about the world in which we live. No matter what we do or say, all creation is holy.

I'm always a bit amused by the slogans that tell us to put Christ back into Christmas. I know the motivations behind such exhortations are good. But I'm amused because, in the deepest sense, nothing we can do can ever get Christ out of Christmas. God created all that is. God made each one of us in God's image. God's love is the energy that brought the creation into being and is the energy that holds it all together. No matter what we do or do not do, there's no way that we can get God's love, as revealed in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, out of Christmas. We can try to push Jesus aside. We can try to ignore God's loving Spirit, but we can never rid the world or ourselves of it.

Let me try to say it another way. In the universal realm in which you and I live and have our existence, the whole of God is present at every point in space at the same time. God doesn't come and go. God is always present, totally present.

So, in the first place, God's very personal gift to us at Christmas is that God is among us and within us in a new and powerful way. Secondly, this means that the creation is one. Spiritual and material are simply two different ways of talking about the world in which we live. Finally, this means, in addition to giving gifts, we need to be the receivers of God's very personal gift. And that is not always easy for us to do.

We enjoy thinking of ourselves as generous, giving people. That's one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. It is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The newspaper keeps us posted on how many families have been adopted and will receive gifts. We prefer to think of ourselves as givers — powerful, competent, self-sufficient people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power so that we can benefit some of the less fortunate. And that's okay. We need to be givers.

But we also need to be receivers, and that's what the story of Christmas is also all about. This strange story trains us how to be receivers of God's very personal gift.

It's not as easy as it sounds to be on the receiving end of God's love or anyone else's. We want power on our own and don't like picturing ourselves as dependent, needy, or empty-handed. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions but as gifts.

A counselor at a college told me that in her work with students, this is one of the reasons why some young people come to despise their parents. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses, and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather be self-made people, standing on our own two feet, striding bravely into a new world of our creation. It's humbling to look into a mirror at 21 and admit, "My God, I look just like my old man."

So this Christmas, do not be embarrassed to be on the receiving end of God's very personal gift. This is the way God often loves us — with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into the kind of people we don't necessarily want to be.

Tonight we remember a God who is always present and at the same time continually coming to us in new and surprising ways. This loving God blesses us with a very personal gift and calls us to see ourselves as we are — empty-handed recipients of a gracious God, who rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a baby. Amen.