

# THE JOYS OF GIVING



In order to fully investigate the true meaning of the tithe—the offering of our first fruits—we look to Mary for help and guidance. Mary is our example of how to give oneself purely and perfectly. With her “yes,” which she said so simply and so free, she gave her whole life to God—totally and without question.

To imitate her, we reflect upon the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary and do our best to act accordingly. In the episodes of Mary’s life, The Annunciation, The Visitation, The Presentation and The Finding of Jesus, we can reflect upon her abandonment, freedom, responsibility, simplicity and presence—all of the factors of her “yes.”

*Paintings and frescos of the Joyful Mysteries by Blessed Giovanni of Fiesole (Fra Angelico), Early Italian Renaissance Painter and Dominican Friar*



### ***The Finding of Jesus***

*Mary is the perfect example of a mother—trusting her son’s freedom, yet present to Him in all of His needs. Only a mother who is truly a loving presence to her child can live both of these dynamics at once. When Mary finds Jesus in the temple after searching for Him—they have a beautiful moment of “recognition”—each recognizing the truth in the other. And she kept all of these things in her heart.*

## Presence

By Stephanie Stokman

Recently, I was asked if I see my work, staying home with my children, as a “tithe”—as a gift of myself. In reflecting on this question, I ended up seeing it as a gift to myself, because through this work, I grow as a person. The work pushes me to ask for wisdom and for help, and for all of the things that I do not have enough of on my own. It is also a gift to be present with my children, and I can see that the stability of that is as much for me as it is for them.

I was struck by a conversation I had with my mother in law. A friend of hers told her that: “It is not enough to stay at home. You have to stay at home as a presence, a presence like Mary.” Mary worked in the home, and she was a stable presence to and for Christ. I wondered: What does it mean for me, concretely, to be home as a presence for my husband, for my children and for anyone who may come into our home? How is being a presence for them a gift of myself?

In my work at home, I can see that I am trying to be tethered to Christ and to my origin as much

as I can be—in everything—so that my kids can see something through my eyes. So they can come to know the meaning of their existence, as I am trying to grapple with mine.

I think this begins with beauty, which is very important to me and important for our days. I am realizing that my favorite way to spend time together, is to stay in front of things that are beautiful. This helps us to be aware of everything that we have been given. That is why it is important for me to make beautiful meals, even if it is something really simple, or read classic literature to my children, or, spend time outside and experience the goodness and beauty of creation. It is as much for me as it is for the kids! And, it is for my husband Jim as well—it helps him to be a whole person in the midst of his work.

In the last couple of years, I have become more aware of my time. No one is “telling” me what to do with my time at home, and that is a privilege. It is also a huge responsibility—and sometimes a burden—but ultimately a gift, because I can choose to use my free

time in a way that is good. I try to read, pray and fill my days with occupations that help me be more human and more aware of what is being given. I am juggling a lot: caring, and cooking, and learning, and being outside, and getting to know people, and all of these things! But then, when I share these things with Jim, I can see it open him up.

This is so important for Jim’s work. When he comes home, it is good for him to see that I am here, the kids are here, and we are really living our life. I am not just trying to keep them busy or keep myself busy. I am trying to grow, and so there is a kind of life in our home that is really tangible. I feel like all of this welcomes him into a life that is happening! A life that is interesting and has possibilities.

There is so much more beyond the utilitarian aspect of work, and hopefully this life in our home can inspire that. I hope that having the home orderly and clean—in a humble way at this stage—can remind Jim of Beauty with a capital “B.” Striving for this, as challenging as it is, shows that we love our

life, and that is the same as loving Christ.

I remember a friend of mine told me something that her mom said to her in high school: “I don’t tell you to keep your room clean because I want you to have a clean room. You clean your room because you love your life.” Even something as simple as making a bed! There is something about making your bed in the morning that is important. Even if it doesn’t seem to affect anything else, it is a sign of gratitude: “I am doing this because I love my life.”

When I am home, I am really cognizant that I am choosing to give all of myself to be present for a few people, and I see that as a tithe. I am giving them my availability and my capacity to love and nurture.

To be present in this way is also a sacrifice. It is challenging and demanding work. It is work that is really humble, because it is made up of repetitive tasks like cooking, groceries, getting the kids down and washing their clothes—mundane work that I am not “compensated” for, and so it cannot be measured in that way. It can, however, be measured in other ways—like in the simple and beautiful things that my children say.

Christ calls us to be more like children, and not the other way around. To be present with my children is a gift, because I have the chance to be around people who are much simpler than me! This morning, we read a little bit in John’s Gospel about the “bread of life.” During lunch my daughter said, “Was that true what God said?” I asked her what she meant. She said, “That if I eat the bread, I won’t die?” I asked her

what she thought, and she said, “Then you can’t tell me that I’m ever going to die, because I’ll eat the bread, so I’ll live.” I had no idea she had been thinking about it all morning! It is really beautiful to know that she is thinking about these things, and I am privileged to be present with her in that.

Reading helps me to see differently and pay attention to my life and my children in a deeper way. I just finished a book by Dorothy Day, and in it she says: “Patience, patience, and the very word means suffering. Endurance, perseverance, sacrament of the present moment, the sacrament of duty.” I am struck by that, by the word “patience” in particular. She is expressing something so true, and can I see in these moments when I feel discouraged, that I am capable of living in the present.

Cook a meal, pray, change a diaper: yesterday, I didn’t have the energy for any of that, but I had to keep doing it—and yet, I know that I am in relationship with Christ, and that He is present. To stand up and do the next thing is a way of loving Him because it is what I am being asked to do—the duty of “the sacrament of the present moment”—because I want my little actions, that are repetitive and unsuccessful, or whatever they are, to have a connection to eternity. This desire is what allows me to keep giving myself as a presence in my home, and I can see that in following this, I have grown.

—Stephanie Stokman is a wife and mother of four young children, living in Madison, Wisconsin, and she leads a Well Read Mom reading group.

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