

The weeks before Christmas are filled with confessions for a priest. And this year while hearing confessions at the Advent Penance Services I noticed something. One of the most common sins confessed is anger or impatience with a spouse. That's not the new insight! I've known that since I was ordained. Oh boy, do I know it! But what did suddenly enter my head was to begin to ask the married penitents when they confessed such sins, "Do you have a daily plan for praying for your wife/husband?" Some would say, "I mention them in my prayer list." But none of the spouses I asked said they prayed for their husband or wife in any kind of daily, regular, substantive way.

On this Feast of the Epiphany I want to preach about that idea. We hear in the Gospel today the Magi bringing their gifts to Jesus, as acknowledgment of Him being the Messiah. I want to look at that idea of giving gifts in this Christmas season. I hope all of you spouses gave presents of some kind to one another on Christmas. But I want to

suggest one more gift you have probably forgotten to give – to your spouse and to Jesus.

Families are the basic cells of society. If they are unhealthy so is society – just look at America today! And marriages are the foundation of the family. If marriages are unhealthy so are families – again, look at American society today! And your marriages are going to be healthy in so far as you fulfil their purposes. You were married for two purposes – one: to procreate and educate children – and two: to make one another happy, which means helping one another to heaven, your ultimate happiness. For a married person the eternal happiness of one's spouse is a primary goal of life. But, as I said, it seems most Catholic spouses never pray and intercede in any organized and sustained way for their wife or husband. That is the greatest gift you can give them!

What kind of prayer am I talking about? Remember the twenty minutes of silent solitary prayer I keep asking you to pray each day? Well, use just five of those minutes (but a real five minutes – 300

seconds) every day to pray for your spouses. Start by thinking: what are they going to run into today? What are they looking forward to? What are they dreading? What's tempting them? How are they hurting? Imagine the life of your spouses – and then start to intercede for them in specific ways. Ask God to be with them, help them, protect them in all those situations and conditions. Maybe you add a decade of the Rosary to the five minutes to aid in the intercession. And let's be honest, many (most?) of you are not praying twenty minutes a day – yet. But maybe these five minutes could be the start of the that.

What good would this do? First, it would open your spouses to the grace of God through your prayer! This is our way to imitate the Magi and acknowledge Jesus as our King, the ruler of our lives. Don't you think your spouses could use His power in their lives? Where are they going to get such prayer if not from the person who has vowed before God to help them spiritually?

But beyond such spiritual power, this way of praying will change your relationship with your spouses. If you are really praying like this for them, you will need to know more about them. What are they doing today at work, at home? How are they feeling? But you will not just come to know more about your spouses, you will have a rooting interest in their lives if you take your five minutes of prayer seriously. They will become, not just thorns in your side who do ridiculous things. Their faults and failings will become your business – not as irritants and problems, but as subjects of your charity and prayer! A relationship can't help but get more charitable if the people in it are seriously praying for one another.

But I'm not only preaching to those already married. What about single people? Why not assume, if you've discerned that you're called to the vocation of marriage, that God has someone in mind for you? And if that's so – why not start praying for that person you are dating? Or even if you are not dating someone right now, but plan on marriage

someday, why not pray for your future spouse before you know him or her? They're out there somewhere and in need of prayer. You won't know the details of their needs, as you will after you are married, but there are common goals and temptations we all face. Why not help your future spouses even now by taking five minutes a day to pray for them?

On this feast day of the Epiphany when we think of the Magi's gifts to Jesus of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, why not follow their example and give Him the best? It's truly a gift to Jesus to fulfill your marriage vows spiritually by praying every day, in serious way, for your spouse. But such prayer is just as much a gift to your husband or wife, girlfriend or boyfriend themselves. In fact, it's the perfect gift that everyone needs, and nobody had enough of. The Christmas season isn't over. On this twelfth day of Christmas give the best gift, a resolution to express your love as intercessory prayer for the person you're called to love the most.