

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD - VIGIL MASS AND MASS DURING THE NIGHT DECEMBER 24, 2025

A group of Franciscan brothers and priests run a homeless shelter in the Bronx. It's called "Saint Anthony's Shelter for Renewal." Along with food and shelter, the friars offer religious services and spiritual counseling to the men who come to them for help.

They have a tradition every Christmas Eve of putting on a celebration for their guests. It begins with a sumptuous dinner with all the fixings. During the meal, the friars lead the men in Christmas carols. Then, when they have finished, each guest is led through three rooms full of gifts. They are allowed to take as many as they want.

One Christmas Eve, a man whom the friars called "Fitz" arrived at Saint Anthony's Shelter for the first time. He had just been released from jail and had nowhere else to go. After several years in prison, he had a hard exterior. So, he was surprised by how warmly the friars greeted him and how friendly the other guests treated him. He was not quite sure what to make of the whole scene. He decided to just sit back with his arms folded and keep to himself.

When the food came out, however, it was not at all what he expected. The meal was warm and fresh, so he took as much of it as he could fit on his plate. He sat down and ate it quickly, almost as if he were afraid someone would take it away from him. One server even came by with a smile and asked if he would like some more. He just couldn't believe it.

Then, the friars got up and told the men about the three rooms they had set up full of gifts. They led them in a prayer of thanksgiving for all the people who had been so generous in providing them for the men. One by one, the men went through, taking whatever they wanted. When it was Fitz's turn, he didn't expect much. He thought the other men had already taken the best stuff. But when he walked in, there were still plenty of coats, blankets, socks and other things that he desperately needed. And they were not second hand, worn out clothes, but new ones still in the package. The volunteers greeted him with a smile and helped him pick out whatever he wanted.

At the end of the evening, one of the friars noticed Fitz in a corner by himself with his head in his hands. It was clear that he was crying. He went up to Fitz to ask what was wrong. All he could manage to say was, "It's too much. It's just too much."

Up to that point, all Fitz had ever experienced was rejection, violence, and pain. Now he was encountering true love, kindness, and mercy. It overwhelmed him and brought him to tears.

It is fitting that it was on a Christmas Eve that Fitz experienced the transforming power of love. Because that is the meaning of this great day - that the love of God has come down to earth. And it is so much more than we could ever hope for or imagine. It is really "too much", because God gives us nothing less than Himself. With the birth of Jesus Christ, there is nothing left for God to give.

So many of us go through life like Fitz. We might not have been in prison, but we have learned to protect ourselves. We've developed a hard exterior to keep us from getting hurt. We've stopped expecting a lot from others - and maybe even from God - so that we won't get let down. Life has wounded us, and we've had just about all the pain that we can take.

It is only the love of God that can give us the trust to let down our defenses. We are loved unconditionally by the God who created us. There is nothing that can separate us from that love. There is nothing we can do that will make God love us any more or any less. In fact, He loved us so much that He sent His Son to earth. And He sent Him not to condemn us, but to die for us. He sent Him not to give us more rules, but so that we could have a relationship with Him. The universe isn't ruled by dark, cold, and impersonal forces. It is ruled by a God who knows us each by name and who loves us each uniquely.

Once we encounter that love for ourselves, we can then share it with others. We can let our guard down and love others from the heart. Even if they break our hearts and let us down, we can bear the pain. Why? Because we are supported by the love of God.

That is why there are places in this world like Saint Anthony's Shelter For Renewal. Everyone who volunteers there has been touched by the love of God. They naturally want to share it with others. That is why they can embrace guests who haven't showered for weeks. That is why they can serve food to them with a smile, even if they are rude or ungrateful. That is why they give their time on Christmas Eve when they could be home with their families. They have seen the kindness and mercy of God displayed in the Christ child. It has changed them forever. And they have to share it.

The miracle of Christmas is made new every day at Mass. Jesus continues to offer us His unconditional love in the Eucharist. The Blessed Sacrament is the risen body of the child who was born for us this night. When we receive the Eucharist, we receive all that Jesus is. There is nothing more He can give us. He simply asks that we make a home for Him in our heart and allow Him to transform us - and even overwhelm us - by His loving presence. It is really too much for us to comprehend. But it is true. And it is all so that we can have joy and share it freely and generously with others.

(story told by Fr. Mark-Mary Ames, CFR, in the Rosary In A Year Podcast)