

The last thing I see before I leave my room at the rectory and head out into the world is a crucifix. This particular crucifix depicts Christ the King. He is wearing a crown and is dressed in the vestments a priest would use when celebrating Mass.

My brother-in-law gave me this crucifix. He told me his mother wanted me to have it and gave it to me shortly after she died. To be honest, I didn't think much of it when I received it. It's not an image of Christ that I usually meditate on. And the figure of Christ was missing a hand. Christ's other hand was missing some fingers. When I first received it, I put that crucifix in a box and forgot about it for a few years.

After I relocated to another parish a number of years ago, I re-discovered that crucifix when unpacking my things. At that moment, the crucifix had an impact on me that I didn't feel before. As I gazed upon it and reflected a bit, I had the sense that God was calling me to let his Son shine through my priesthood. I also understood that God wanted me to be the hands of Christ for others. Since that time many years ago, this crucifix has had an exalted place by the door in my room.

What initially seemed like something broken and nondescript is now a treasured item for me.

To the uninitiated, the cross seems like nonsense. As we know, the cross was an instrument of torture – not just for Christ but for many others who were sentenced by the Roman authorities to die in this fashion. Crucifixion was carried out by the leaders

of the Roman Empire to shock, terrorize, and threaten the citizens of lands under Roman rule. The message that crucifixion conveyed was clear: if you go against the leaders of Rome, this could happen to you.

It was Christ who transformed the significance of the cross for Christians. Even while suffering the torture of crucifixion, Christ did the unthinkable. Christ proclaimed words of forgiveness toward his persecutors from the pulpit of the cross. From the cross, he promised eternal life to the thief who confessed his sin and asked for mercy and eternal life. From the cross, Jesus affirmed the Father's concern for those who suffer when he said to his Mother "woman, behold your son," and to the beloved disciple John he proclaimed, "Behold your mother."

You and I were signed with the cross at baptism. We make the sign of the cross when we pray. The sign of the cross is a bookend for the beginning and end of Mass. The sign of the cross is made over us at the beginning of our lives. It is perhaps one of the last signs made over us before we are buried. The cross is a sign of God's generous love for us; it is a sign of God's care and concern for us.

Catholics live under the sign of the cross. Every liturgical act we engage in, every event in our parish facilities, and many of our meals in our homes or restaurants begin and end with this sign. The sign of the cross reminds Catholics that we are to imitate Christ's love poured out on the cross by how we treat each other.

We imitate Christ's love by how we serve others and specifically through the ministries we engage in. One particular way we

sustain our parish's ministries is through our generous support of our parish at the offertory. Your generous gift to our parish's offertory makes a host of ministries possible: youth ministry, ministry to the sick and dying, faith formation ministry, and the ministry of our Catholic school.

Each year at this same time I ask you to review and pray about how you financially support our parish's mission. I pledge to join you by looking at and increasing my gift to the parish's offertory. I give more than 5% of my salary to the parish's offertory each year. In addition, I give more than 1% of my salary to the bishop's Catholic Ministry Appeal or CMA. Lastly, I give more than 4% of my salary each year to charities of my choice – like financially supporting our school and the FAST justice ministry in Pinellas County.

Catholics are asked to consider a 10% tithe from their incomes to these ministries – again, 5% to the parish, 1% to the Catholic Ministry Appeal, and 4% to other charities that are dear to you.

At this point, you might be saying, “I can't possibly give 5% to our parish. If that's the case, I'm asking you to consider raising your gift to the offertory by .5% or 1% each year or so until you reach that level.

If it has not already been delivered to your homes, you should receive this week a brochure that details our stewardship efforts under the title “Ambassadors of Hope.” Financially supporting our parish with your generous gift is what enables us to share the hope of Christ with our faith community, with our families, with this local community, and with the world.

I am asking all parishioners to prayerfully reflect this week on your current giving to the parish offertory. In addition, I'm asking you to increase your gift to the offertory as best you can. I will be doing that. I hope you will join me by making a similar effort.

Since I give online, I will be going into the parish's online giving portal and will increase my offertory giving there. I will also turn in my commitment card which I just received in the mail at Mass next Sunday. That card represents my commitment to make this new financial sacrifice for the coming year. Please bring your card to Mass with you next weekend and return it when asked to during the Mass.

If you have not received a card in the mail, there will be cards available in the pews next week and at the entrances of the church. During Masses next week we will be asked to fill out and return to the offertory one of those commitment cards.

I want to thank you in advance for your generosity to our parish and its mission. Your gift enables our parish to be the heart and hands of Christ to so very many.

By way of conclusion, I want to offer this prayer by St. Theresa of Avila which is especially relevant on this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and as we embark on this increased offertory effort. The prayer is called ***Christ Has No Body***.

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Amen? Amen!