

Strange Gifts

It arrived just before Christmas in a brown box, with a priority mail label on it. The addressee was a Post Office Box in Alachua, Florida. Once I saw it, I tried to think of whom I knew in Florida who might be sending me a Christmas present. This address was not familiar.

On opening the box, I discovered a receipt amid the white popcorn-like kernels that cradled it. The receipt indicated that it was from a parishioner and gave his address. The package was shipped to “Father Tracy” and it stated my address. At the bottom, the company thanked me for “supporting” them.

Digging some more through the white packing, I discovered a yellow colored paperback book. On the outside was a picture of a chariot being driven by a gentleman who wore a cone-shaped hat and the chariot was being pulled by a set of white horses. It reminded me of a scene from the famous classic movie, “Ben Hur.” In fact, according to the inside cover, the picture represented Lord Krishna enlightening Arjuna on the sublime teachings on the battlefield of Kuruksetra. Then, I looked at the title of the book. I could not even pronounce it after several attempts. It read, “Bhagavad Gita as it is” by “His Divine Grace, A.C. Bhakwivedanta Swami Prabhupada” The book was published in May 1971 in Sydney, Australia. Flipping to the end of the book, I noted that it has over seven hundred and twenty pages.

The back of the book had quotes from some famous people including Mahatma Gandhi, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Basically, they all indicated that when doubts haunt them, when disappointments stare them in the face and they don't see any ray of hope, they all turn to this book for enlightenment.

I'm still curious as to why someone might send me such an unusual gift for a priest. After all, I have been immersed in the Catholic faith from birth. I wonder if the parishioner thought I needed some more enlightening from a different perspective.

My book collection has grown at a very modest rate since Hurricane Katrina. Having lost my forty year collection of books then, I often find myself looking for a book I had before the hurricane, my mind keeps telling me, “I used to have that one.”

Usually, I have several books by my chair along with a highlighter. Depending on the mood, there is a book that fits it. I just finished reading James Martin's book “Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life.” As the title suggests, the gift of laughter and humor are an integral part of the Catholic faith. Other times, when my mind yearns to be fed with something more substantial, I will take up a recent theology book and try and decipher it. Sometimes, I may take up a magazine and read a short article to nourish my mind and heart and give me something to chew on for a while.

Now, having devoured, with a little help from the office staff, the home baked chocolate chip cookies, the nut mixes, the assorted pecan containers, the brownies, the banana bread, the Christmas fruit cakes, the chocolate samplers, the Christmas sugar cookies and the countless other edibles; I need to peddle a little harder and longer or else my pants waist size will inch forward.

Through all this, as well as reflecting on my unusual gift, I come to the conclusion that all of us have a tendency to share as presents what we ourselves like. We live under the presumption cloud that, if I like it, enjoy it, eat it, read it, then my friends, including my pastor, surely like, enjoy, eat and read the same things as I do. Shakespeare has King Henry IV say, “Presume not that I am the thing I was.”

So, now, what do I do with Krishna's “Bhagavad Gita as it is?” Do, I take it up and read it in a moment of weakness to gain some enlightenment I may not get some place else? Do, I confine it to my sparse bookshelves where it can gather some dust? Do I fear that some day, someone may browse through my book collection and ask, “I didn't know you were into reading that stuff?” Red-faced, will I begin to tell them that I am not only to allow them to ask further, “Then, why do you have it on your shelf? Sheepishly, I will have to tell them the whole story about a parishioner who thought I should be exposed to a different kind of enlightenment. I hope he or she will be enlightened enough to stop asking more questions.