

Opt for Christ-centered gifts for holidays

Ladies and gentleman, start your engines. Well, at least warm up your credit cards. The race to the Christmas shopping finish line is about to begin, and if that fills you with as much dread as delight, you're not alone.

It's such a lovely idea, this concept of gifting others as a way of expressing our joy at the gift we are given in the Incarnation. Unfortunately, we all know how sometimes this lovely idea becomes a commercial nightmare. We end the season wondering how many of our gifts really pleased their recipients, how many were a waste of resources and if some of them degraded the people whose labor produced them.

Sometimes I have a sense that the gifting part of Christmas is another country entirely, a tawdry and wasteful country that I would just as soon



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Coming of Age

be done with before I move into the Christ-centered country where I want to live my holiday.

What to do?

Catholic Relief Services offers one idea, a catalogue on their Web site called Work of Human Hands (www.catholicrelief.org/work).

The catalogue is brimming with fairly traded handcrafts and gour-

met foods and coffees, all presented by low-income producers in the Third World.

"Fairly traded" means the artisans and producers receive a just recompense for their work, without a middleman grabbing the lion's share. The nonprofit cooperatives to which these producers belong often offer training, management skills and in some cases even pension plans.

Another great idea for some people on your list might be a gift to a charity made in their name. Granted, not everyone would be thrilled to receive this in lieu of something they could unwrap. But maybe Grandma has all the knickknacks and lotion she can use and would be gratified to learn that a local soup kitchen would be enriched on her behalf.

For me, children's gifts are challenging. As deadlines loom and the

mall seems increasingly crowded, I have given in to the temptation to grab one more plastic toy that probably was made in a sweatshop somewhere by a child not much older than the one for whom I'm buying it.

I was inspired last year to read a nationally syndicated writer say that he gave each of his grandchildren, as a Christmas gift to open, a fleece jacket. Period.

Stingy? Bah-humbug? No, on the contrary, his real gift to them is quite generous. He takes them on trips, outings, adventures that they share. He gives them the gift of his time.

After all, what we were given on Christmas had nothing to do with "stuff." But it had everything to do with the gift of self.

Effie Caldarola is a columnist for Catholic News Service.

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