

Living the Spirit Thanksgiving

Over the years I have written about thanksgiving many times. This is because the virtue or habit of being thankful is a great part of our spiritual growth. We cannot live the Spirit of our faith without learning this habit. At the same time we have the tradition in our country of observing Thanksgiving Day. Each year our presidents in modern times have called on citizens to be thankful for the blessings the Nation and its citizens have received.

Thanksgiving Day has a history that is traced back to the Pilgrims as early colonists of the new world. Having survived the challenges of settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Pilgrims called for a harvest festival. For Catholics it is worth recalling that the religious motivation of the Pilgrims was not completely positive. As Puritans they were committed to abolishing all vestiges of what they saw as “popish” practices. One of these was Christmas. Even several decades after Independence, Massachusetts forbade Christmas as a holiday. But as time has passed, this part of the story has been forgotten. We can be thankful that for the most part it has ceased to exist.

In celebrating this civil holiday the country comes together in wanting the nation to be a thankful one. A Provident God has bestowed on it many bountiful gifts. As a nation we have advanced the possession of personal freedom. At the same time our thanks is directed to many others than God. In some few cases we must admit God is forgotten. It requires political courage, we are told, for a president today to mention God in his proclamation.

I want to mention here that each of us may have particular personal reasons to observe this day. As individuals most of us have many, many reasons to be grateful. This gratitude is owed to God but it does not stop there. Throughout our life we are blessed with living in a culture that still values thankfulness. Children who are properly taught learn early on to say “Thank you.” Those who are my age find it quite easy to say the same to many who deserve our gratitude.

Thanksgiving Day should be celebrated with at least some recognition of its spiritual roots. Today the secular holiday has overshadowed its religious meaning. Many of our traditions are truly delightful. We surely appreciate and enjoy the day of feasting -- and for some, football! We should see these customs as rooted in their spiritual motivation. It becomes a special day when we are able to make it a time of hospitality. The gathering together of families, the concern for those who are lonely or needy, the remembering of those no longer with us – all these make it a special day.

Let me now turn to the theme of spiritual thanksgiving. My study of biblical theology confirmed that thanksgiving is decidedly a Christian virtue and a Christian truth. The Old Testament does not say much in explicit terms about thanksgiving to God. It is a case of not saying the obvious. It was a duty to praise and adore God in the Old Covenant, and in this praise and adoration was enveloped thanksgiving.

In the New Testament thanksgiving truly breaks forth, becoming ever present in the prayer and life of the followers of Jesus. Biblical thanksgiving is certainly Christian. It is with joy and thanks for God's gifts that Christians pray. And they do not pray alone. Christ is at the center of Christian prayer, sustaining our weak efforts of praise and thanks to a loving God. He calls us to seek even more gifts and we can find them in the sacramental life of the Church. It is our hope and prayer to find them in eternal life with the saints in heaven.

Jesus prayed with thanksgiving to the Father. Over sixty times the word "eucharist" is found in the New Testament. This word means thanksgiving in an inclusive way. Catholics should see what is obvious – the connection of thanksgiving to the supreme act of thanksgiving in the sacrament of the Eucharist. There we are joined with Christ in His prayer of thanks. We hear the command at Mass: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." And we reply: "It is right and just!"

The Eucharist as an observance or celebration is for us the occasion to lighten some of the dark shadows of our days. All need some freedom from the daily grind. All need the understanding of what it means to be united to the divine. When we consider that the Eucharist embraces not only each individual but all God's People, we extend our thanksgiving to others.

Go to your Bibles and you will find words that commend thanksgiving to you. St. Paul writes many times of this duty of the Christian. "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your petitions be known to God." [Ph 4,6] "All whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him." [Cl 3,17] "Be filled with the Holy Spirit – speaking in Psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles and making melody in your hearts to the Lord – giving thanks always for all things in the house of our Lord Jesus Christ to God and the Father." [Eph 5,8-20]

There are many examples of thanks offered to God. We find this in Noah, the early patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon. Those cured by Jesus in His public ministry also give us examples of gratitude. Sadly, we also find examples of ingratitude which surely hurt the human heart of the Savior. What, moreover, does ingratitude do to the heart of one who fails to give thanks to God!

In past inserts I have mentioned how celebrating a special day of thanksgiving has made evident the love of Christians for one another. You may see it this Thanksgiving if you look around you. You can surely find love among the blessed who live their faith with thanks. I hope that you will find ways gratefully to show the love you have for God and for others. Extend your blessings to the poor, the needy and the lonely. Share the Eucharist with your fellow believers. Know that your priests thank God for you. We wish you a Happy Thanksgiving, a day of joy and grace.

God love you always!

Monsignor David Morrison

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