

THE ART OF THANKSGIVING

DONALD SULLIVAN, O.P.



O live happily, one must acquire the art of giving. But there is another art to be acquired which is not less important—the art of receiving. And an essential part of artful receiving is the return of thanks for what has been received. With true lovers, this art of thanksgiving is not only a loving return but a return of love. Among the first words a mother teaches her child are “Thank you.” Fr. Vincent McNabb, in describing the beauty of a child’s learning the art of thanksgiving, has written in his own simple way: “A Mother says, with her gift to her little one, ‘Say, thank you.’ And the little one taking her gift and words says, ‘Thank you.’” But even before this maternal instruction begins, before a child can learn to speak, it smiles to beg; and a smile is its thanksgiving.

In putting away the things of a child, why do some include, unhappily, the art of giving thanks? Man never loses the desire to receive gifts, but he is often negligent in returning thanks to his benefactors. Those who are careless in their appreciation of gifts, the symbols of someone’s love, wonder why they receive few gifts. Ingratitude among men is not easy to forgive because it is so selfish, but there is a more serious form of ingratitude, and that is irreligion. It is the ingratitude of men toward God, when they misuse His gifts to them, and even at times turn them directly against Him. The gifts, symbols of His infinite Love, they cherish, but they ignore the Giver.

Reflection on the nature of God’s benefits enables man to realize in a small way how great must be the love of that Giver. This knowledge should compel a return of love and thanksgiving from all but the most selfish of men. Thanksgiving is of the essence of love of God; thanksgiving, not merely for the gifts, but above all and before all, for the love of the Giver. Such a thanksgiving makes the Giver rejoice in knowing his love has been accepted. Such a return of love becomes a challenge to bestow more love and more favours upon the grateful heart of the creature.

But often men become so engrossed in enjoying God’s gifts that they forget the Divine Benefactor who conferred them. Instead of using the gifts as a means of drawing closer to the Giver, so that He

can give them perfect and everlasting happiness, they make the gifts themselves their end. God's gifts become their idol, their god, an abuse of the blessings of grace and of nature, which leads them far away from their bountiful Creator.

Every gift man receives comes to him from God as its fountainhead. "All things were made by him: and without him was made nothing that was made." Some of these benefits are of the supernatural order, while others are in the order of nature. Grace is the most precious of the supernatural gifts. Among the natural gifts are body and soul with their faculties, parents, friends and material possessions. Infinite wisdom has decreed that all these gifts be used as stepping stones to the higher life, that they be as means for man's gaining Heaven.

Sanctifying grace, the most perfect and priceless gift of God to man, orders the whole man to God. This grace is the gift of which Christ spoke to the Samaritan woman; "If thou didst know the gift of God." "But he that shall drink of the water I will give him, shall not thirst forever." With the assistance of grace, man controls his lower nature by reason and reason submits humbly to the laws of God. It is for this gift above all others that men should give thanks to God. They may have natural gifts in abundance for which to be thankful, but without grace these lesser gifts can never be brought to full perfection. For it is the function of grace to perfect nature.

Now the good use of his gifts by the one who receives them is what every giver intends. When the will of the giver is fulfilled in their use, the gifts become a means of uniting the wills of the lover and the loved one, of the one giving and of the one receiving. And what is this union of wills but an expression of love, and an act of thanksgiving? Thus it is evident that the best way for men to thank God for any gift, natural or supernatural, is to unite their will with His in the use of the gift, to use them as He wills that they use them. The teaching of Holy Scripture on God's design for us is simple: "This is the will of God, your sanctification." All his gifts to men are ordained to that end, man's sanctification. Sanctity of life, the practice of the virtues, is the thanksgiving most pleasing to God. To increase in grace is to increase in virtue; to increase in virtue is to increase in sanctity; to increase in sanctity is to become more united with the will of God. The greater the gifts of God to man, the greater should be their thanksgiving, their sanctity.

It follows, therefore, that the life of a virtuous man is a continual thanksgiving to God. Christ is the life of his soul and it is in union with that Divine Mediator (between God and man) that the soul re-

turns love to God and thanksgiving for his gifts and blessings. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is his chief prayer of thanksgiving. Every act of virtue is its own thanksgiving for the love that sent the gifts of grace and of nature found in that virtuous act, because an act of virtue is mainly an act praising God by doing his will. A life of holiness is the finest expression of the art of thanksgiving. Such a life is only possible by using well all the gifts, and especially grace. The man of good will is able to find in the gift of the Sacrament of Penance, Love forgiving another. The gift of the Blessed Sacrament is Love, giving Itself.

Christ Himself is, par excellence, the Model as well as the channel of thanksgiving. The soul in which Christ dwells by grace gives thanks with and in Him for God's gifts to man. When Christ is the life of the soul and His grace is the principle of every human act, it becomes possible for men so to live that in the words of the Preface of the Mass, "They give thanks always and in all places . . . through Christ our Lord."

"Gift better than Himself God doth not know,
Gift better than his God no man can see;
This gift doth here the giver given bestow,
Gift to this gift let each receiver be:
God is my gift, Himself He freely gave me,
God's gift am I, and none but God shall have me."
(Bl. Robert Southwell)