

Dearly beloved,

Today's Gospel about the ten lepers is short but striking and well worth our prayerful attention both now and when we return to our homes. The lepers had faith in Our Lord such that they thought he could heal them; for the lepers were social outcasts and the most profound way Jesus could have mercy on them was to heal them of their leprosy and thus restore them to society. And yet upon being cleansed (Our Lord told them to show themselves to the priests, for that was what a leper had to do upon being healed), only one returned to show gratitude for the favor so freely and generously given. The others went on with their lives and let their routine get in the way of showing proper thankfulness to God. Just as with last week's parable, the Samaritan gives us an example to imitate, contrary to the expectations of Jesus' listeners and especially his enemies.

The Samaritan's action—thanking Jesus for being healed so suddenly and at only a few words from the lepers--shows the beauty and spontaneity of thankfulness. It shows beauty, because as Seneca says, "It is the mark of a good character to attend more to goodness than to evil," and the thankful person chooses to focus more on the blessings of life than on its negatives, and spontaneity because gratitude arises from love for the one who has bestowed the blessing, and the response to that knows no bounds if the love is sincere and strong.

In speaking about gratitude, St. Thomas Aquinas helpfully speaks of three levels of response to the good things we receive from others, foremost of whom is God, then our parents, then spouses and then friends, and these three levels can assist us in becoming more grateful persons, which is not only a necessity to live an integral moral life, but also because a grateful person is attractive and serves to draw others to Christ and His Church.

The first level of gratitude is to recognize that a favor has been given. This is harder than it seems, for we so often overlook gifts from those we take for granted. In the realm of grace, since most of us are semi-Pelagians of some variety, we do not readily recognize the constant movement of God in our souls, drawing us to conversion, to penance, to prayer, to perseverance. Pelagius' idea of grace was that it was restricted: God only acts now and again, but not continuously; we can do many good things without Him. In contrast, Augustine argued for the all-pervasive nature of grace—every good thought, inspiration, word, action—all of it is due to God's movement in our souls. God is much more at work bringing about our salvation than we are. To use just one example: a man falls into mortal sin; he needs to go to confession. God is the origin of the man's sorrow over his sin, his desire to be forgiven, his confession, his absolution, and his doing of penance. A Pelagian thinks that God intervenes only at the time of the absolution; a Catholic believes that God is at work through the entire process, and therefore he is thankful for each movement of grace along the way.

Thus for most of us the first movement of gratitude towards God involves a better theological grasp of how active God is in our lives. There is a parallel between the way God sustains and enlivens things on a natural level and his activity in the realm of grace: whatever exists exists because of his continuous action to keep that thing in being; whatever good happens in our spiritual lives, whether it be acknowledgement of sin or growth in holiness or desire to pray, all of it is due to divine motion inside of us. And just as God keeps things in being by sending other things necessary for life, such as rain and food, so he sends or allows things good and useful for our spiritual growth. He is the source of both the good movements inside us and the good things outside us. If the first step of gratitude is recognition of favors given, then this is key to truly being grateful persons.

In this realm it is also good to consider how much we take for granted (and thus fail to see) in regard to our parents and our spouses. Our parents are the source of so many good things in our life, beginning with life itself. St. Thomas rightly says we can never repay them for even that gift considered by itself, but added to that is their supplying the context in which we can grow and mature. It is the mark of a small soul to dwell on parental sins and shortcomings, for they too are children of Adam, damaged by original sin, their own sins, and the current deformative culture. Better to express gratitude as often as possible, to see that most if not all of my good qualities come from the influence of my parents, and even where I feel I have surpassed them in some quality of soul, it is often their contrary influence that brings about the goodness in me. This is a reason for gratitude.

With spouses, the sense is the same: husband and wife do so much for one another that a great deal gets taken for granted. The wife endlessly toils to raise the children and keep the house; the husband labors constantly to put food on the table and shelter the family, but somehow such things are overlooked. Even more important is the mutual support they offer one another, the willingness to suffer alongside, to never give up, to not run away; in our culture these are precious gifts—even if they ought be normative to human life, they are not in our society, and it is right to see the gift of the other person who gives his or her life to me over and over again.

And in regard to friends, it is enough to quote the book of Sirach: “A faithful friend is a strong defense: and he that hath found one, hath found a treasure. Nothing can be compared to a faithful friend, and no weight of gold and silver is able to counter the goodness of his fidelity. A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality: and they that fear the Lord, shall find him.” We can never be too grateful for good friends.

The second step of gratitude after recognition is an expression of appreciation and thanks. This is obvious, but we often neglect it as well. It is not enough to recognize the favor; there must be an acknowledgment made which the other person experiences. All the lepers recognized the favor Jesus had given them; they could not have failed to notice that they were now cleansed. But only one expressed gratitude, and notice what he did—he ran back to where Jesus was and thanked him. For human beings, our expressions of gratitude nearly always involve physical contact, whether words exchanged, an embrace, a letter, or a phone call. We can, of course, express gratitude to God by simply lifting our mind and heart to him, and many times that is all we can do, and it pleases him very much, especially when we do so spontaneously in response to some good thing that happens or which we call to mind. But it is better to undergo a material inconvenience to do so—visit the blessed Sacrament, light a candle, go on a pilgrimage, attend daily Mass, get down on our knees—in proportion to the favor received. We are not angels, and so our gratitude is shown by physical gestures; this should also be the case with gratitude toward God.

The final step of gratitude is to repay the favor given. In regards to certain persons, we can never fully repay it: what God gives to us is far beyond our ability to give back, and I already mentioned that parents can never truly be repaid. And yet even in these situations there are two things worth remembering: first, gratitude does not rest chiefly on what is done, but how much love is expressed in doing it; gratitude is a matter of the heart, and a grateful heart quickly repays the gift not by doing great things, but doing little things with much love. Here our model is St. Mary Magdalene—she thought the forgiveness of her sins was worth a public show of love toward Christ, whereas Simon the Pharisee did not. He loved little; she loved much, and by such love each showed their gratitude or ingratitude. Note also that Mary was intent on the Lord, not on her sins, and she loved the most by forgetting herself and seeing only Him. So also when Jesus has freed us from our sins, especially if we habitually fall into serious sin or are still weighed down by past sins, we show the most gratitude by turning to Him and overlooking ourselves. A prisoner who is freed from the dungeon does not stare at his shackles and bemoan his past; he lovingly gazes on the one who freed him and looks to the future.

A second point comes from a curious source, but a providential one. When Aquinas wrote his analysis of gratitude and thankfulness in the Summa, he cited Seneca, the famous Roman philosopher, who wrote a treatise on gratitude and returning favors. In it, he examines the question of how a poor man can repay a rich benefactor and suggests three actions: the giving of good advice; frequent fellowship, and pleasant conversation. Though of course Seneca had in mind human benefactors, for which the counsel still holds, it can also be applied to our returning gratitude to God, especially in the Eucharist. We give the Lord advice when we intercede for others and for ourselves, suggesting what He should do in the world to increase good and curb evil, to encourage the downhearted and thwart the malicious and he is always pleased by such prayers. We engage in frequent fellowship when we sit with the Lord and acknowledge and adore His presence in our tabernacles and on our altars. And we give ourselves to pleasant conversation when we speak to Him as a friend, making ourselves available to Him, setting aside the best part of our day, as well as spontaneous times throughout each week, to converse with Him. It is not in vain that the Blessed Sacrament is named Eucharist in Greek, meaning thanksgiving, for by honoring and worshipping Christ in His Body and Blood, we most

perfectly show our gratitude to God for the Incarnation and Redemption. And by His constant presence among us, He gives us the opportunity to dwell with Him and show our appreciation for his countless blessings.

So today, despite all the evil happening in our world and in the Church, may we be resolved to be persons marked by gratitude. In this time of crisis, let us make the words of Psalm 115 our own:

I have believed, therefore have I spoken; but I have been humbled exceedingly. I said in my excess: Every man is a liar. What shall I render to the Lord, for all the things he hath rendered unto me? I will take the chalice of salvation; and I will call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord before all his people: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. O Lord, for I am thy servant: I am thy servant, and the son of thy handmaid. Thou hast broken my bonds: I will sacrifice to thee the sacrifice of praise, and I will call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the sight of all his people: In the courts of the house of the Lord, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem.