

**Mass for Thanksgiving Day
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

November 27, 2014

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: there seems to be a general trend in our country that when unexpected and tragic events happen, people tend to go to church in greater numbers. This includes personal events such as the death of a loved one or a divorce, as well as national events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 or the unfortunate events of this past week in Ferguson, Missouri. When something happens that leaves us searching for an answer, an answer that seems impossible to find in any other way, we turn to the last source of hope - God.

We see this very thing happening in our Gospel today as we hear the story of the ten lepers who come to Jesus, imploring His help to have pity on them and to heal them. They had likely heard of the miraculous cures that Jesus had done and saw this as a last-chance effort to be freed from this terrible condition. This example demonstrates how willing we are to go to God in our various times of need or distress.

What happened next in this story is also characteristic of what continues to happen today. After the need of these lepers was met, they went on with their lives and only one of the ten came back to Jesus to thank Him for the miraculous healing. The reason for this is that they no longer had any need for Jesus. His assistance, in addition to healing them, gave them a sense of peace, having their anxiety removed, freeing them to return to a so-called normal life.

Most churches report that shortly after a tragic event which prompts an upswing in church attendance, the numbers return back to their previous levels. For some, the anxiety of the situation was alleviated in their lives and they were able to go back to their normal way of life. For others, they do not find a satisfactory answer to their worries and they leave, trying to find some other means of easing their troubled minds and souls.

This trend shows that the general attitude of many toward God and their faith is one of convenience. When in need of help, the priority that is placed on our faith goes way up. When everything is going well, that priority tends to go down. What this trend also indicates is a limited understanding of what prayer is and why it is so important to our lives.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists five basic types of prayer: blessing, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and praise (CCC 2644). For many, prayers of petition and intercession, in which we are asking God for something, are almost the exclusive forms of expression in one's prayer life.

Without these other forms of prayer in our lives, the experience of our faith is deprived of the fullness that God desires for us in our relationship with Him. Because these other forms of prayer are not always on the top of our mind, we need to be intentional about making them a part of the regular practice of our faith.

The prayer of thanksgiving is one which we turn to in a special way today as we celebrate this civic holiday of Thanksgiving. Historically, this day has been one in which we are invited to pause and reflect on the blessings that we have received, giving thanks to God for His generosity toward us in our lives. In reality, though, it can sometimes be difficult to find reasons to thank God, especially when we are in the midst of difficult circumstances that appear impossible to overcome. In moments like this, it is all the more important that we thank God so as to be ever mindful of the truth of our faith that tells us that He will never abandon us and that He will grant us the graces necessary to persevere through any situation.

As Christians, we should always be able to have this supernatural outlook on life. This outlook should prompt us to be ever grateful for the many ways in which God has been working, even if those ways remain hidden to us, for we firmly believe that "all things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). This belief gives us hope and we can even give thanks in advance for all of the good that He will do for us and through us as we continue to stay close to Him on our journey of faith.

Gratitude also has the effect of motivating us to be more generous in the living out of our faith. The more we recognize that all of our gifts come from God and are not the result of our own efforts alone, the more we feel the need to give back to Him. As God, He is not in *need* of anything that we can give to Him. But our gratitude toward Him is important for us, for as we hear in one of the prefaces of the Mass: "For, although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation."¹ This thanksgiving profits us for salvation in that our hearts are more open to following Him more closely after having seen how abundantly He has provided for us in the past and we are confident that He will continue to provide for us in the future.

This heart of gratitude which turns our gaze away from ourselves and toward God, also opens our eyes to the needs of those who are around us and are in need in various ways. In the Gospel that we heard this past Sunday for the Solemnity of Christ the King, we are reminded of the obligation that we have not to overlook our brothers and sisters who are struggling. We are to reach out to them and share with them from our blessings. Jesus reminds us that by doing this, we are serving Him. Our care for our neighbors, then, is an important way in which we are able to give back to God in thanksgiving for His coming to our aid in our times of need.

In his proclamation establishing the Thanksgiving national holiday in 1863, our city's most famous citizen, President Abraham Lincoln, said, "The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God. . . .

“I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

Your presence here this morning is a testament to the fact that you understand the importance of the prayer of thanksgiving in your lives. In a way, you are like the one leper who returned to give thanks to Christ. We are not to be critical of the other ninety percent who have not come to give thanks to God. Rather, we are to see in them individuals who we have the opportunity to bring the Good News to, encouraging them and bringing Christ’s love to them.

We may even be encountering some of those people today in our family gatherings. What a wonderful opportunity for us to speak about being grateful to God for the blessings that we have received, not in a way that draws attention to us and our piety, but rather, giving glory to God from whom all blessings flow. We can never underestimate how such a seemingly small gesture on our part may yield great fruit in the hearts of those with whom we come into contact.

As we continue our celebration of this Eucharist, let us give thanks to God for His many blessings. As we receive the greatest blessing in His Body and Blood, may our hearts burn with an ever greater desire to let Him reign more fully in our lives and to extend that reign by sharing His Word and His love with the world around us. By doing this, we make our desire His desire, that all will come to know, love, and serve Him in this life, so that we might all be eternally happy with Him in His Kingdom in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Common Preface IV