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The Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving

George Herbert wrote this splendid prayer beseeching God for a thankful heart:

Thou that hast given so much to me,

Give one thing more, a grateful heart. Not thankful when it pleaseth me,

As if thy blessing had spare days;

But such a heart, whose pulse may be

Thy praise.

We are not thankful very often. Complaining, griping, always on the watch to impress with a witty clever judgement, usually at someone else's expense, we are prone more to sound like a caucus of cawing crows than the "reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice" that we offer to God every time we receive the Holy Communion.

It is a dreadful habit. But one so ingrained that such casual criticism is now the sine-qua-non of mass entertainment and socially acceptable chatter. The quicker you are, the more pedantic and affected in this acquired skill, the more points you score. And everyone approves the score with enthusiasm. It is so pervasive that one wonders whether the interspersed claims of sincerity and truth are authentic or mere products of the same pretense.

With Herbert, we need to pray for a grateful heart. Thankfulness is without a doubt the key to the spiritual life. Humility begins with thanksgiving, and with humility comes a true perspective of who we are before God. With a heart that is grateful to God, one finds security, contentment, and happiness.

A number of years ago a friend and fellow graduate student of mine taught me this. It has stuck with me ever since, although I make no claims to virtue as a result. Sometimes lessons learned are also relearned. Such is the case with me and the necessity to be thankful. At least, I still carry this precious possession in the grace filled reservoir of my memory, some fifteen years later.

My fellow graduate student had come from very modest

circumstances. His raw ability was clearly superior to the rest of us, even though there were aspects of his character that frustrated his ability. Bad habits and established tendencies occasionally surfaced that would impede the productivity of his brilliance, and we all suffered with him, wanting him to do better, and so pleased to see his gifts flourish when they had the chance.

One day in the middle of a profound discussion in the graduate lounge, where the debates were often deep, and as is the case with graduate students, equally presumptuous, we came upon the blessed idea that we would continue the saying of the daily office in the college chapel, which had been discontinued for the summer.

Another student began to describe an abbreviated structure for our evening prayers, abbreviated so as not to occupy us with more burdens than we as advanced students already suffered! At this point, my friend remarked that whatever structure of prayers we decided upon, we must always use the prayer of Thanksgiving.

He was right and our services never ended without it. It was a striking fact that my friend, both talented and vexed, whose new life as a brilliant student seemed always to be wrestling with a troubled past, wished to bring all that he was to God with a grateful heart. For all of us this became a necessity, a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, well pleasing to God and of infinite benefit to our souls.

And so it was that we found ourselves secure in the knowledge that the goodness and loving-kindness of God had created and preserved us, throughout our lives, up to those summer evenings in the chapel. In the saying of our prayers we were able, for those brief moments at least, to find contentment, not lost in the particular ambition and competition of the academic world, but grateful for all that we had and were, especially our work that pleased us so much.

We knew then, as all Christians have known and will know, that each time we say the prayer of Thanksgiving, and recall the inestimable love of God redeeming the world, our hearts are fixed where true joys are found.

What a different view from the vicissitudes and calamities that afflict us all, terrors both from within and from without! Thanksgiving frees us to put everything in perspective, right where it belongs, within the good providence of God who loved the world so much that He gave His only-begotten Son. It is He who says, "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you."

How can we not be grateful for the providence of God who works all things together for good to them that love Him? This is the reality of His power and goodness. He is able and willing to bring good out of evil, just as Jesus, forsaken and crucified, rises from the dead, the second Adam bestowing His life giving Spirit, the firstborn among many brethren.

Thanksgiving, the grateful heart, is the substance of true spirituality. If you are wondering where to begin your spiritual journey, or how to continue while confronted with overwhelming adversity, or how to advance deeper into the streams of living waters, your answer is found at each and every step purely and simply in the sacrifice of a grateful

heart. It is there in humble thanks that God shows us His face.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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