

Sacred Heart Novena *Gardiner Street (7)*

A heart of thanksgiving

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Introduction

Welcome again to "Is your heart in the right place?" Last night, while sketching the Ignatian examen, I mentioned thanksgiving as part of our review of each day. Of course, you don't have to be religious to practice this. One couple I know, detached from institutional religion, end each day with a similar review, taking care to mention three things that went well and one thing which really didn't. It is a kind of secular examen: still grounded in a sense of overall gratitude.

Topic

So, why is thanksgiving, being grateful, so good for us?

Arguments

1. Very simply, we all need positive energy in our lives. Because the negative makes itself felt, sometimes sharply, it is easy to feel that that is the main "story" about me or about us. Not a great place to start. For example, even the way we start each Mass is probably not a good idea: let us call to mind our sins. Imagine a family meal and we are all around the table, and the mother says: now before take a single bite, let's hear all the bad things we did in the last week, all the "stuff" we are unhappy about and feel guilty about. Not example conducive to harmony and happiness! As they say, it would set up the wrong dynamic. We need the positive because therein lies the potential for healing and grace.

2. A good practitioner of this is St Paul. All his letters, with one exception, start out with a great prayer of thanksgiving. This was an innovation in letter writing at the time. (The one exception is Galatians where the Apostle is just too upset to praise the Galatians.) A good example is found in the very first letter of his to come down to us, the letter to the Thessalonians. At the start we read:

We thank God always for all of you as we mention you constantly in our prayers, because we recall in the presence of our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Thessalonians 1:2-3)

In Greek, it is quite poetic: *Eucharistoumen tō theō pantote peri pantōn*. Paul manages to include his favourite triad of faith, hope and love.

In all the letters, he has serious things to deal with, but not at the very start. Instead, he commences with gratitude at the wonders of God's grace in people's lives. If ever we need inspiration for our own discovery of gratitude, we could do worse than read these opening prayers in the letters of St Paul. It does not mean ignoring the negative: just not letting it take over.

3. So why is thanksgiving so wholesome for us? Lots of reasons. It values people; it underlines our interconnectedness; it highlights love, compassion and respect; it invites us to recognise that we have enough; it instills attitude of kindness and even joy. In a word, thankfulness is a whole way of looking at things, a kind of culture of grace which can also be cultivated. We can choose how we go at life. To choose to recognise the good is very much a life-choice.

It is also a life-choice which sits very well with faith. In a spirit of thanksgiving, we are really recognising the giver behind every gift and say our own "yes" to God. After all, our small yes is really a response to God's extraordinary yes in Christ. We read, in a perhaps neglected passage of Paul from 2 Corinthians, the following:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one who was proclaimed among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but it has always been "Yes" in him. **For every one of God's promises are "Yes" in him;** therefore also through him the "Amen" is spoken, to the glory we give to God. (2 Corinthians 1:19-20)

God's yes to creation. God's yes to his covenant. God's resounding yes in Jesus. God's yes every day to me and to you.

Conclusion

As I read out the lines from Paul in Greek (*Eucharistoumen tō theō pantote peri pantōn*), you will have heard an echo of the word for thanksgiving in Greek: "*eucharistia*." Our Eucharist is indeed our Great Thanksgiving. It is not at all an accident that the word Eucharist contains the word grace within it: *eucharistia* and *charis*.

Even if we are not actually together around the table of the Lord, every night we can experience our own Eucharist, our moment of thanksgiving as we practice the examen. Each day, we recognise God's grace and we thank the giver of every good and perfect gift. Eventually, when we will be able to gather again bodily as a community, we can harvest all these little Eucharists, which are real, and bring them to our Great Thanksgiving.

The great spiritual guide from the late Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart, once wrote: "If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, 'thank you,' that would suffice." No harm to repeat that: "If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, 'thank you,' that would suffice." Thanks be to God.