

On Gratitude
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Introduction

In this Lenten talk I want to highlight the roots of an attitude of *gratitude* in Christian understanding of creation, part one, and salvation, part two; then, in part III, applications to our lives and our world.

I. Creation and Gratitude

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola presents to the retreatant the *First Principle and Foundation*:

We are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save our souls.

All the other things on the face of the earth are created for us so that they may help us in attaining the purpose for which we are created.

From this it follows that we are to use them as much as they help us on to our goal in life, and ought to rid ourselves of them so far as they hinder us.

In a past talk in this chapel in another year, I used the two creation stories at the start of the book of *Genesis* to flesh out three fundamental themes which the Hebrews believed and taught were central to the nature of the human person and our relationships to all of creation and the people around us and across the world. Those three themes were **goodness, stewardship or co-creation, and covenant community**. Three key concepts, then, are at play here—*goodness, stewardship, and community*. Each fleshes out the meaning of our creation in the “image and likeness” of God (to use the language of *Genesis*) and our understanding of Ignatius’ *Principle and Foundation*. At the heart of each is a revelation of God, a sharing of some aspect of God’s own truth and life, which in turn reveals to us a corresponding aspect of our own truth.

First, in the very dynamic of creating, the Creator shares the very fact of divine existence and goodness—God’s own goodness. In so doing, we are created “very good,” *Genesis* says, in our own being and becoming.

Second, God shares divine dominion over the creation, and, in that very instant, endows us as co-creators, stewards of the earth with a dominion of responsible and reverent care for the world. As the U.S. bishops put it in *Economic Justice for All* in 1986:

Creation is a gift; women and men are to be faithful stewards in caring for the earth. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work.¹ [repeat]

(Saint Pope John Paul II had written earlier about human labor as co-creation with God, and Pope Benedict will later talk about our *covenant with creation*.)

Third, God reveals divine kinship with us by freely choosing to dwell with the human community. We are thus constituted as a covenant community bound to one another as sisters and brothers, one interdependent family with the Lord God Yahweh in our midst and divine life within us.

Two attitudes should follow from this understanding: GRATITUDE and REVERENCE. First, gratitude: When we realize that we are not "just" creatures (plants, animals), but creators, sharing in the "divine initiative" of creation, in the "divine action" of giving and not just receiving ("like God"), we are invited to intense gratitude and more. Matthew Fox put it this way:

Perhaps the most gross of all dualisms is the dualism between the divine and us. *As if we hold no divine blood in us*, as if we are creatures only and not creators. Co-creators with God.

Fox continues:

Recovering the theme of our co-creativity with God is itself salvific and redemptive. This theme too awakens us to be the instruments of divine grace that we are called to be. It renders life *powerful, meaningful, worthy of sacrificing for*. It overcomes boredom and superficiality. ... in creating humanity God wanted that creativity and healing to be carried on with *special gusto and energy* through humanity being true to itself, which means being true to its *divine capacity for creativity*. [Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 236]

When we understand even part of the fullness of this revelation, our natural inclination should be one of great gratitude for our innate human dignity and, to quote Fox, our "divine capacity for creativity."

The second and related attitude when we come to understand the meaning of creation is, to use an Ignatian term, *Acatamiento* (reverence) because we (creation, human life) are of God and like God. The implications are: (1) reverence for nature around us, both nature "as given" and nature "as enhanced" by human creativity, to use a distinction of Saint Pope John Paul II; (2) reverence that extends to all the people around us and their potential capacity to be like God; and (3) reverence that must extend to ourselves and invites us to fully employ all our creative gifts and to shun all the ways in which we can be self-destructive, including, to use a Henri Nouwen term for giving up on ourselves, "thinking-ourselves-to-death."

Let me return to the nature of *gratitude* arising out of the Judaeo-Christian belief in a good God who is the source of all creation (however scientifically that may have occurred). In his book *Putting On the Heart of Christ*, deceased Loyola Professor Jerry Fagin, SJ, wrote about the true wisdom of God

1. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, November 13, 1986, in *Origins*, November 27, 1986, Vol. 16, No. 24, pp. 409-455, no. 32.

which he had learned from years under the tutelage of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius had had a vision in which he saw that all of life is gift from a loving God.

For Ignatius, Jerry wrote, “a Christian is one who sees everything as a gift from God. Everything points our minds and hearts to the Giver of all good gifts.”

Jerry continued, “Gifts are gifts only when they keep us in touch with a giver. The moment we lose touch with the giftedness of any aspect of our lives, we lose touch with the Giver of all gifts.” [30]

The gifts we have received, then, should lead us to love God in return and to a desire to serve God and God’s people (a love which Jerry shared with so many of us here). That desire to love and serve, Jerry wrote, was rooted in great gratitude. In Jerry’s words:

The graced awareness that all has been given by God moves one to gratitude and the freedom to clutch at nothing, but to return everything, even our very selves, to God with the deep conviction that God will continue to grace and gift us. [31-32]

I will return to Jerry’s emphasis on freedom and gratuity later in this talk.

II. Salvation and Gratitude

In the first part of the *Spiritual Exercises* the exercitant (the person making the exercises) is steeped in the reality of sin—its malevolence, its pervasiveness, its personal and social nature, and its capacity for destruction of the individual and the world. It is also seen as *ingratitude* to the Giver of all good gifts, a theme to which I will return. The awareness of sin also generates a prayer for gratitude at the end of the meditation on hell in the *Spiritual Exercises*. That prayer reads, “I shall also thank God for this, that up to this very moment God has shown himself so loving and merciful to me.” (*Sp.Ex.* 71)

It is in asking to know, love, and follow Jesus during the *Exercises* and then in accompanying Christ through his rejection by the people, abandonment by the disciples, and torture and execution by the religious leadership and the Romans that the exercitant is invited to reach to new heights of gratitude. Contemplations of the passion reiterate the three questions asked earlier in the *Exercises* while contemplating Christ upon the cross:

- What have I done for Christ?
- What am I doing for Christ?
- What ought I to do for Christ?

The Jesuits gathered in Rome at the 34th General Congregation in 1995 spelled out the role of gratitude flowing from the salvific death of Jesus and how it provokes a profound response in action. They explained:

In remorse, gratitude, and astonishment—but above all with passionate love—Ignatius, first, and then every Jesuit after him has turned prayerfully to “Christ our Lord hanging on the cross

before me,” and asked of himself, “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What must I do for Christ?” [SpEx 53] The questions well up from a heart moved with profound gratitude and love. This is the foundational grace that binds Jesuits to Jesus and one another. “What is it to be a Jesuit today? It is to know that one is a sinner yet called to be a companion of Jesus as Ignatius was.” [GC32, D2, #1] And the mission of the reconciled sinner is the mission of reconciliation: the work of faith doing justice. The Jesuit freely gives what he has freely received: the gift of Christ’s redeeming love. . [Characteristics of Our Way of Proceeding, no. 4, emphasis added]

Every person making the *Exercises* encounters that same invitation, rooted in gratitude for our salvation from sin and its destructive power enacted by the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That invitation is to become a companion of Jesus and to continue His saving mission in the world. At its root it is founded in *gratitude for salvation* which complements and deepens the *gratitude for creation* with which I began.

So what are the implications of living a life of gratitude and the challenges of ingratitude.

III. Gratitude and Ingratitude

Let me start with *Ingratitude*. Here is what Ignatius once wrote about ingratitude in a letter to Simon Rodriguez, one of his first companions:

It seems to me in the light of the Divine Goodness, although others may think differently, that ingratitude is the most abominable of sins and that it should be detested in the sight of our Creator and Lord by all of His creatures who are capable of enjoying His divine and everlasting glory. For it is a forgetting of the gracious benefits, and blessings received. As such it is the cause, beginning, and origin of all sins and misfortunes. On the contrary, the grateful acknowledgment of blessings and gifts received is loved and esteemed not only on earth but in heaven.²

How many times have we heard parents say to their children who have just been given something, “Now what do you say?” And the child almost reluctantly says, “Thank you.” I have been struck for many years—especially in restaurants—by the absence of those simple words when diners are having their glass refilled with water, their meal served, or their plate taken away by a server. It is only one example, but it occurs so often that I mention it here as a symbol of a larger forgetfulness in our society of the gifts we receive daily from creation and from those around us.

Sometimes the gratitude in our lives comes from very personal choices we make, and we must never lose sight of those. A wonderful reminder of that is in a little text from writer and poet Raymond Carver called *Gravy*:

²Ignatius Loyola in *Letters, No. 55. The Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by William J. Young, S.J., Chicago, 1959

GRAVY

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.

Gravy these past ten years.

Alive, sober, working, loving and being loved by a good woman. Eleven years ago he was told he had six months to live at the rate he was going. And he was going nowhere but down. So he changed his ways somehow. He quit drinking! And the rest?

After that it was *all* gravy, every minute of it, up to and including when he was told about, well, some things that were breaking down and building up inside his head. "Don't weep for me," he said to his friends. "I'm a lucky man.

I've had ten years longer than I or anyone expected. Pure gravy. And don't forget it."

—RAYMOND CARVER
(1938-1988)

The gratitude represented in these lines is a wonderful reminder for all of us of the importance of gratitude in our daily lives for so much that we all receive.

But gratitude is equally or more important nationally and globally. As a nation, despite the lingering bitterness of the last election, we have been profoundly gifted. Gratitude requires at least two skills of us: *noticing* and *remembering*. Remember how Ignatius talked about ingratitude: "*For it is a forgetting of the gracious benefits, and blessings received.*"

On the political front, we have an array of freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution that are the envy of the world. They did not come easy; and they still have to confront prejudices that would deny rights of one kind or another to different groups because of their religion, country of origin, gender, or the color of their skin. We have access to government—by vote, petition, phone call, email, or social media—from the precinct to the nation's capital that is sadly underused and being increasingly undermined by declining citizen/voter participation and the overweening power of wealth and media empires in influencing policy-makers.

Educationally, we have an extraordinary array of institutions and systems which are largely available to Americans and which reflect private, religious, and public styles, substance, and funding. True, we still have 12th graders who can't read, and we are doing too little about it as a nation. But, compared to most of the countries of the world, we are immensely blessed with the right and the capacity to pursue learning from pre-school to post-graduate education and even through an amazing system of public libraries.

Our physical infrastructure in this country, about which we all complain, is extraordinary. We have back roads in rural counties which are superior to the main highway in Paraguay (I've been there!) and in dozens of other countries. If you consider our roads, bridges, ports, airline terminals, train and bus stations, public buildings, and so many other basics of a modern society, we have enormous wealth. Again, some of this infrastructure is eroding precisely because of political sentiments which are underfunding our basic systems. But, what we have is found in few other nations in the world.

In terms of services, we should stand and marvel at our combined police, fire, sanitation, public utilities, public health, social services, food inspection, postal services, parks and recreation, social media, and so many other "necessities" of modern public life. Sure, there are areas that need improvement—even radical change; but there are far more areas that we have all taken for granted.

Because we continue to ask children, "What do you say?" we tend to think that ingratitude is beneath us, especially as we view the millions of the world's refugees, those dying in Middle East wars and elsewhere, the dead and wounded in recent terrorist attacks, and hundreds of millions without enough to eat. We even have a national holiday called "Thanksgiving." But, looking around again at our society today, what do we think about these current trends?

- Is there gratitude or ingratitude in the current urge to expel millions of immigrants whose labor brings us much of our food or other essential services?
- Is there gratitude or ingratitude for the marvelous wonders of our earthly common home when we trash it in what Pope Francis calls "the tragic effects of environmental degradation"³?
- Is there gratitude or ingratitude when we prosper due to the labors of previous generations of humanity, but now turn deaf ears to the needs of the generations that will follow us?
- Is there gratitude or ingratitude when we continue to consume at a level which cannot be sustained, deepening what Pope Francis calls the "ecological debt"⁴ between the global north and the global south?
- Is there gratitude or ingratitude in relishing political philosophies that tout the individualism of the self-made man or woman and forget that the very languages we speak, ideas we share, education we experience, roads we drive on, and even the internet are social products?
- Is there gratitude or ingratitude in enjoying the prosperity of this country and forgetting how much of its wealth grew from the labor of slaves and the sweat of more recent generations of underpaid workers?

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí*, May 24, 2015, no. 13.

⁴ *Ibid*, no. 51.

- And, in this city and state, do we dare to forget the dreadful and dangerous work of immigrant laborers who restored and rebuilt our homes and businesses in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, recent floods, and now tornedoes?

In his writing, Jerry Fagin reminded us of another very important aspect of gratitude:

Gratitude is a *choice*. Not everything experienced in life is experienced as gift. Moments of loss and tragedy and failure can turn a person's heart to grief, resentment, and anger. The focus shifts from what has been given to what has been lost. At times like this, gratitude becomes a choice to notice and to remember all that has been received and to accept what has happened as hope. The virtue of gratitude disposes us to see the gift dimension of *all* reality, even in the moments of dying. [36]

When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, it is important to remember that the very word Eucharist comes from the Greek word, "to give thanks." At the center of our celebration is the Eucharistic Prayer in which we recall the great deeds of God's love for each and all of us all through salvation and sealed in the dying and rising of Christ Jesus. If we notice and remember and celebrate this, then we can say that we understand the true meaning of gratitude.