

Homily for Thanksgiving

Mother Teresa of Calcutta told this story in an address to the National Prayer Breakfast in 1994. “One evening several of our Sisters went out, and we picked up four people from the street. One of them was in a most terrible condition. So I told the other sisters, ‘You take care of the other three: I will take care of this one who looks the worst.’ So I did for the woman everything that my love could do. I cleaned her and put her in bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hands and said two words in her native language, Bengali: ‘Thank you.’ Then she died.”

Mother Teresa continued: “I could not help but examine my conscience and ask: ‘What would I say if I were in her place?’ My answer was simply that I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said, ‘I am hungry...I am dying...I am in pain.’ But the woman gave me much more; she gave me grateful loving, dying with a grateful smile on her face. It means that even those with nothing can give us the gift of thanks.”

How much was this woman like our Pilgrim ancestors who took time to be grateful even though they had every reason to be ungrateful. Their first thanksgiving celebration in Plymouth Colony in 1621 was not

born out of abundance. They had suffered a terrible journey to this “new land.” They experienced the harshness of their first New England winter and lost countless of their members as a result of travel, weather and disease. They were strangers in a strange land and the land did not yield an easy welcome. And yet they did not shy away of saying “Thank you” ...to each other and above all to God.

Ten days ago the “Thrive” section of the Providence Journal dedicated the front page to gratitude. With a large captioned question, they sprinkled a number of quotes on gratitude throughout the page and the article. I loved some of these quotes. An unknown author wrote: “Be thankful for the bad things in life, for they open your eyes to the good things you weren’t paying attention to before.” A Christian Brother wrote these words: “In daily life we must see that it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but gratitude that makes us happy.” But my favorite quote came from the great Catholic mystic, Meister Eckhart, who wrote: “If the only prayer you said in your life was, “thank you,” that would suffice.”

That’s what this feast is all about. Saying “thank you.” Thank you not just for the good but “thank you” for all aspects of life. “Thank you” for each and every event, friendship and love of our existence. And “thank you” not just to each other and for our country...but “thank you” to God without whom there would be no blessings.

Through the years I always end my Thanksgiving Sermon by quoting the words of the great American, Benjamin Franklin, from a sermon that he gave Thanksgiving day at the dawn of our great country. He wrote:

"Who is rich? He that is happy with what he has.

A home, a wife, children,
these are the great gifts of life.

Wealth is not his that has it, but his that enjoys it.

He who is content has enough, and he that complains has too much.

Having been poor is no shame, but being ashamed of it, is.

You are only poor when you want more than you have.

Enjoy the present hour,
be mindful of the past,

and neither fear nor wish the approaches of the future.

If you would have guests, be happy with them, and be happy yourself.

Nothing dries sooner than a tear.

A long life may not be good enough,
but a good life is long enough.

Wish not so much to live long, as to live well.

Great beauty, great strength, and great riches
are really and truly of no great use:
a good heart stands above all.

Proportion your charity to the strength of your wealth,
or God will proportion your wealth to the weakness of your
charity.

To bear other people's afflictions, everyone has courage and enough to
spare.

People who are wrapped up in themselves make small packages."

May we who celebrate this Eucharist of gratitude this evening and who will share the meal of Thanksgiving tomorrow, never fail to be aware of the countless blessings that enrich our lives and which we so often take for granted.