

On Thanksgiving, What Do You Say?

It is tempting to believe that gratitude is innate or instinctive, but experience suggests otherwise. Most adults can clearly remember their apprenticeship in the attitude of gratitude. Our training is administered in deceptively simple encounters, like when a grandparent offers a cookie, a sibling shares a toy, or a stranger pays a compliment. Immediately after such gifts are presented, there is a pregnant pause before one of our parents fills the void with the default mantra of our training: “What do you say?” Ideally, in time we internalize this training into true, spontaneous thanks.



socializes us to accept favors, not with appreciation, but with smug approval: “I deserve this;” “I earned this;” or “I am owed this.” After Jesus cured ten lepers, only the Samaritan returned to give thanks, prompting Jesus to wonder, “Where are the other nine?” Perhaps this ungratefulness stemmed from viewing their cures as just desserts.

A news report told the story of a parent who purposely sought out a preschool with a “no sharing” policy because she believed that sharing engenders attitudes of entitlement in the recipients of such generosity. How strange that we don’t worry about fostering privileged attitudes in the “haves” as much as entitled sentiments in the “have-nots.” St. Paul writes: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Children of God practice sharing like doctors practice medicine. We do not wish to impose virtue, but rather to nurture the graciousness of God’s generous Spirit.

In the parable of the rich fool, Luke’s gospel suggests that the opposite of gratitude is greed, but greed may be the offspring of entitlement. Entitlement is an attitude that reduces gracious gifts to expected rights. The culture of entitlement



Origins and Expressions of Thanksgiving

And be thankful. —Colossians 3:15

Thanksgiving dates back to the autumn of 1621 when the Mayflower pilgrims, having reaped the first fruitful harvest, gathered with members of the Wampanoag tribe to celebrate a grateful feast. References to an annual celebration first appear in colonial municipal records in the mid-1600s. An elderly magazine editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, wrote to Abraham Lincoln in 1863 requesting to have Thanksgiving made a “National and fixed Union festival.” The last Thursday of November was then designated as a “day of Thanksgiving and Praise.” Words from the official proclamation eloquently inspire a blessed nation to gratitude:

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 even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.



Thanksgiving at Home

For Christians, every Sunday is Thanksgiving Day, for the term *eucharist* comes from a Greek word which means “thanksgiving.” The American Catholic *Lectionary* includes an appendix with readings for Thanksgiving Mass. Perhaps it is fitting that Thanksgiving is not a mandatory feast, for gratitude is best served by voluntary expressions like the ones suggested below.

Give From Your Table: Numerous agencies, parishes, and food banks offer opportunities to feed the hungry at Thanksgiving. Give what you are able to support those efforts.

Bless your Bread: Your parish may include a blessing of bread at its morning Eucharist. If not, families can bless their bread at home, extending hands over it before it is baked or served.

Count your blessings: The Thanksgiving newspaper comes stuffed with Black Friday ads. Instead of starting your “wish lists” or shopping, make a family “thanks list” and read it aloud.

Say Grace Before Dinner: Have each member place grain seed, stuffing cubes, or candy corn—symbols of God’s gifts—into a goblet. Then pass the goblet and have each person hold it while naming a blessing. Then say grace or read Psalm 67.

Celebrate the Eucharist: Most parishes have one morning Mass on Thanksgiving Day. The Eucharist is a graceful way to begin the day focused on God’s blessings in praise and thanks.