

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Patrick McGoldrick

Always and
Everywhere
to Give You
Thanks
– Eucharist

June 2020

Always and Everywhere to Give You Thanks – Eucharist

Patrick McGoldrick

In his autobiographical work *The Seven Storey Mountain* Thomas Merton recounts an experience he had while in New York in late August and early September 1939. It was a time of great tension and foreboding, he recalls, even in that “toughest of cities”, as Europe moved ever closer to war. On his way to Mass on the first Friday of September he heard the news that German planes had bombed Warsaw. What struck him about the Mass (it was a High Mass) was that at the heart of it, even on that day, the priest still sang: “Vere dignum et iustum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere ...”

“Always and everywhere to give you thanks.” Why is this so? Why is the central prayer of the central act of the Church always one of thanksgiving, even in such a dire situation, even in the circumstances in which I write this today, as the whole world struggles to deal with the inexorable spread of the coronavirus?

EUCHARIST

The basic answer is that at the Last Supper Jesus gave thanks over the bread and wine and that, ever since, this is what the Church has done in imitation of him and in obedience to his command: “Do this in memory of me.” In the course of the Mass, as it has developed, the Church makes a solemn declaration of its thanksgiving to God in the eucharistic prayer. ‘Eucharist’ of course means thanksgiving, but from early times the word came to be used more widely also, both of the whole service with the eucharistic prayer at its core and of the bread and wine over which it was proclaimed. They had been ‘eucharistized’. With its connotation of thanksgiving the word ‘eucharist’ took very firm root in Christian discourse, a word of great richness for us Christians, a word that, together with the action it denotes, joins in one communion all the generations of God’s people right from the Lord himself.

Patrick McGoldrick is a priest of the Diocese of Derry and Emeritus Professor of Liturgy at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

THE FURROW

But the Church gives thanks in the eucharist not just because that is what Christ did, as if its imitation of him might be largely of a formal or external kind or little more than an accident of history. From its imitation of the Lord and his words and actions it has developed a deep conviction about and a profound insight into the centrality of thanksgiving in its worship and its life, a conviction and an insight that continue to inspire and sustain its practice. The Church gives thanks because it must, because it knows that it must.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

What form does this thanksgiving take? We have our answer in the eucharistic prayers themselves.

For most of its history the greater part of the Church in the west has used only the Roman Canon, in which the theme of thanksgiving is stated emphatically in the Preface but with very little development there or later. Eastern Churches have had a much richer tradition, and it was the great eucharistic prayers of this tradition that provided the model for what is now our Eucharistic Prayer IV, composed in the early years after the Second Vatican Council.

‘Thanksgiving’ is not to be understood in an exclusive or narrow sense, because in these prayers we see that it flows over into and expresses itself in praise and blessing and glorification and acknowledgment and confession of God.

For what do we give thanks? Eucharistic Prayer IV begins with the mystery of God in himself: “... you are the one God living and true, existing before all ages and abiding for all eternity, dwelling in unapproachable light.” This calls to mind the words of the Gloria: “We give you thanks for your great glory.” It’s an acknowledgment simply of the transcendent reality of God in all its fullness, of the divine holiness and glory, and, faced with this mystery of God and what he is, we human beings can only express our admiration before him, our acknowledgment, and our gratitude that such indeed is our God. The prayer continues with its proclamation of God’s creation and his great plan for all that he has made, a plan traced in the account of salvation history, the story of God’s interaction with his people, right up to the incarnation of Christ in the fullness of time, then on to his life, death and resurrection and his sending of the Holy Spirit, and finally up to its climax in the Lord’s second coming and the glorious fulfilment of all and of everything in him at the end of time.

This history is one both of human response to God’s action and of repeated human failure too, but God never abandons his plan or his people or his creation; he remains present there, in all the

ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE TO GIVE YOU THANKS

world and in the ongoing life of humanity. It's an active presence of God, seeking to make known his great design and to advance it in spite of all human sin and of the continuing human failure to work towards its final fulfilment. God remains faithful to his purpose and he will accomplish it even in and through and in spite of the ongoing history of human resistance and rejection.

OUR RESPONSE OF THANKSGIVING

What God has done reveals something of what God is in himself and of his great project in creation; it reveals his love for us, his presence to us and his unceasing work on us and in us. We owe everything to God: we can claim no credit for any of it, not for creation, not for our own existence, not for our salvation at work all around us and in us, not for the hope it gives us. All is God's gift. Confronted with this realization, we can only give thanks in response – thanksgiving expressing itself explicitly and in a whole range of forms and attitudes. Thanksgiving isn't just a prayer or formulary of words. It invites us to a deeper level of understanding, it seeks to enter the heart and to become a disposition of soul and an attitude of life. It's for us to be in harmony with what it proclaims, to grow into it and to express it in ourselves and by our way of living, as people of grateful minds and hearts and souls and lives. Such thanksgiving brings us to God and it helps us to recognize more and more clearly the immense range and the profound depths of God's blessings and to return love for love in responding to them.

THE EUCHARIST IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

At this point we should ask the question: is Eucharistic Prayer IV and the tradition on which it is modelled just an extended prayer developed to enhance the celebration of the eucharist, to highlight the sacredness and the solemnity of the occasion, or is it truly eucharistic in a deeper sense, in that what it expresses and develops and celebrates is the mystery at the very heart of the eucharist, arising out of that mystery and not just added from the outside to our liturgical celebration? To pose the question in a different way, do we learn something more about the eucharist itself from the great sweep of such prayers as Eucharistic Prayer IV?

Certainly we do. The history of salvation outlined there isn't merely a sort of prelude but it enters into the eucharist as part of it. To put it the other way around, in celebrating the eucharist we are celebrating not only the Lord's actions at the Last Supper and the death and resurrection which followed. This is indeed the core

THE FURROW

of the eucharist, but in Christ's paschal mystery, anticipated by him sacramentally in what he did at the Last Supper, his whole life is summed up and completed. All his mission, all the direction of his life, all that motivated and inspired him right through from the beginning, all of that has brought him to this moment and is somehow present there in him now, in his body on the cross and in his actions at the Last Supper, in which he anticipated this in mystery.

But Christ has a still wider role in the divine plan. The whole history of salvation was directed to him. From the beginning God was making ready for the incarnation, working on the conditions that would lead to it. In his own time and his own way he prepared the Jewish people to produce in Mary one who could be the mother of his Son. It was a long and tortuous history, with many failures through human sin and many setbacks. But God persevered throughout and in the fullness of time all was ready for the coming of his Son among us in our nature. In God's design and by his grace all his immense labour came to its fulfilment in Christ, and in that sense continues to be present in him. In himself Christ sums up and embodies all that God has worked to accomplish.

This means that in the eucharist as Christ gives it to us the whole project of God, the whole history of creation and of salvation as proclaimed in Eucharistic Prayer IV, is somehow present. And not just present – active too. Because that project of God will not reach its full accomplishment until Christ's second coming. In the meantime God's work in the world and in his people goes on, as it did all through the Old Testament and before it, and the eucharist celebrates this and looks forward to it; it confirms our place in it; it commits us to it and itself advances it. The heart of the eucharist is not a timeless, unchanging, other-worldly mystery but one that sweeps us up in its forward dynamic march towards the consummation which God is ceaselessly at work to achieve.

What Eucharistic Prayer IV presents to us so fully as reason for our thanksgiving, all of that we enter into every time we come together for the eucharist; as the Church and as individual Christians we are caught up in it, with all that it demands of us in our prayer, our motivation, our daily living.

Can we take a step further? By Christ's gift, the bread and wine, sanctified by the Lord's own words and by the Holy Spirit, become his body and blood. Here the dynamic driving the eucharistic prayer forward reaches a new and higher level: in these eucharistic gifts, held up for our veneration and offered to us for our consumption, there is manifested a sacramental expression and recapitulation of the divine-human interplay of salvation up to and including its first climax in the event of Christ. This dynamic will continue to drive

ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE TO GIVE YOU THANKS

the prayer forward, because, under these signs of his sacrificial death, it is the Lord as he is now who is present, the Lord in the fullness of his resurrection and ascension. In him God's great plan is completed already – but not yet in us, his brothers and sisters, not yet in all of creation. And so in the eucharistic body and blood present before us there is also a sacramental anticipation of the long course of this salvation history that still remains to be lived, and of its final consummation in Christ when he comes again in his glory. May we say that the eucharistic gifts themselves embody all that the prayer with its magnificent breadth and sweep proclaims and celebrates?

THANKSGIVING, OFFERING, PETITION

For the most part, it is true, it is only in the first half of the prayer that this theme of thanksgiving is explicit. But indeed the prayer is eucharistic throughout, up to the final Great Amen. In the second part of the prayer our thanksgiving *expresses* itself in offering and petition.

The momentum of the prayer carries us beyond words of thanksgiving into the very presence of that for which we give thanks, but thanksgiving is still the frame of mind and spirit in which we seek to enter these deeper riches of this mystery. And if we recall the universal extent of the effects of the mystery, right to the limits of creation and to the whole of humanity and to the end of time, then it is right that our thanksgiving for God's gift should also take the form of *petition*, petition that these effects be realized everywhere in Church and world through the transforming and renewing and perfecting power of the Holy Spirit, petition that they be realized in the world to come among the faithful departed and all who have died in God's mercy, petition that all of us be united one day with Christ and with one another in God's new creation.

And indeed, however skilfully and beautifully our expression of thanksgiving may be composed, however deep the faith with which we proclaim it, however fully we may be living it in our hearts and in our lives, this expression of our thanksgiving isn't our final word. Eucharistic Prayer III, remembering Christ's death and resurrection, and looking forward to his second coming, says: "... we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice." The memorial that the Church makes is of such depth and power as to give rise to an offering, and the offering that we make is not our own in its core but Christ's. Even our thanksgiving in its highest expression is itself given to us as a gift by God, and so it surpasses all that we of ourselves could ever say or do. It calls to mind the

THE FURROW

words of one of our Common Prefaces: “... *although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation, through Christ our Lord.*”

THANKSGIVING IN THE FACE OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

To return to Thomas Merton at Mass that day in New York. “Always and everywhere to give you thanks” – must we then give thanks to God for all the evil in the world, all the injustice and exploitation and violence and abuse, all the illness, the coronavirus, and natural disasters of every kind? When I was a young altar boy, the parish priest used to quote from time to time in his sermons a simple poem. It thanked God for all his blessings, for this and for that, and the last line was: “*Thanks be to God that what is is so.*” Can we agree with this? If it is our duty as Christians to seek to overcome evils of every kind in the world, if this is part of the work God expects of us for the fulfilment of his plan, what truth can there be, if any, in the last line of this poem?

Confronted with the supreme reality of God and his mystery, human affairs and human understanding must take their proper, subordinate, place. We believe that God is present in all our human situations, even in ills of all kinds. And when the happenings of life or our own actions place us there, that is where we must seek God, actively seek him, and that is where we shall find him. Evil and catastrophe are part of the world created good by God. From the beginning God allowed for this, and, if God permits it, then he must have a *purpose* even there. If this is so, it must have a role to play in the outworking of his design, a design that is always one of love. God is there, even in the midst of such evil, and he can use this too in the fulfilment of his will, working on us his people to prepare us for the good that he has always intended for us. The history of the Old Testament makes this very clear, and history is still on its way to the goal God has for it. Nothing is wasted by God or beyond his transforming power. In his skilled hands, even such things become means by which he will achieve his purpose: the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, the new humanity, the new you and I.

With an understanding such as this, the Church can thank God that what is is so, while all the time striving to change what is but should not be so or, if this isn’t possible, engaging with the situation as it is in whatever ways it can. It can thank God for what he is in himself, for his active presence with us and his love and his higher purpose, right there touching us, even in circumstances of disaster and evil, working to turn these to our good.

ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE TO GIVE YOU THANKS

Suffering is an iron law of life. It was so in Jesus' life and he confirmed for his disciples by his words and his example. We give thanks *in* suffering but do we give thanks *for* suffering? What disciple, present that afternoon on the hill of Calvary, could have found anything for which to give thanks to God? And yet, ever since, what took place there has been at the heart of the Church's thanksgiving. We do give thanks to God for what Christ suffered or at least we come very close to it. We give thanks for all that his passion and death achieved for us, but this is not for the suffering considered in itself. It is for the presence of the Father to Christ, despite appearances, in and all through it; it is for that suffering as accepted willingly by Christ out of his obedience to the Father and out of his love for all the world. It is for that suffering thus transformed, given its redemptive power and made life-giving, by the faithfulness with which he embraced it and lived it right to the end.

St Paul has his own specifically Christian insight of faith to share with us. He speaks of his completing in his own flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church. That is the privileged role that God in his wisdom and love has assigned to us in the realization of his plan – and not just for the good of the Church but for the well-being and the salvation of the whole world.

In the circumstances of the coronavirus as it spreads, we are being reminded frequently that we are all in this together. This is a truth of much wider application, because even as individuals we are always part of the wider communion that makes us one. Suffering *willingly borne* is part of the contribution that God invites from all of us and each of us. It will bring its pain and its sorrow, but true understanding together with firm faith, hope and trust can find comfort there and can draw a response even of thanksgiving. By his endurance of his own suffering Christ has made this possible for us and he has given the example for us to follow.

I was struck by the account of the martyrdom of St Paul Miki and his companions in the Office of Readings on 6 February. Facing their imminent death by crucifixion and the spear, three of them are explicitly recorded as giving thanks to God, thanks that clearly came from the heart.

+ + +

“Always and everywhere to give you thanks.” No doubt from another starting point and using different words and categories of thought one could also present this mystery in all its fullness. But the Church has not been mistaken in placing thanksgiving at the heart of its prayer and so of its life, and in continuing to insist on it.

THE FURROW

We started with the experience of Thomas Merton in a church in New York on a day of anxiety and fear. But from there our theme of thanksgiving has brought us into the immensity of God, his holiness, his glory, into the richness of his inner life, into the love, the abundance, the generosity, the wisdom of his plan; it has brought us into the great whole of which we, all together and each individually, are part; it has brought us into the process of growth and transformation that God is always overseeing and directing and correcting and moving forward on its course to the great fulfilment. By God's grace and power all of that is somehow made present in the eucharist and draws us into it. In what better way could we begin to respond than by giving thanks?

Hoping for Heaven. Why are images of heaven so often boring? Why are few Christians attracted by images that after all wish to portray a fulfilled life with God and the saints? Hallelujah-singing baroque angels, static images of silent gardens, peaceful alpine mountaintops, and stable cloud formations nowadays enthruse few people to contemplate the afterlife. Joining inner-trinitarian movements and communities somehow does not offer a more wonderful perspective for many Christians either. The Christian Bible does not provide much help here. The gospels portray Jesus addressing his contemporaries using the language and religious imagery of the time. However, rather than alluding to the afterlife, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of God's reign in this world. Consequences of his proclamation for a life after death only appear very sporadically in the gospels. For Jesus, the end time has already begun, and it finds concrete shape in his ministry and in the response of his disciples and the people he meets on his way. Nowhere in the gospels do we encounter static images of an afterlife. Rather, the gospels point to a conflict in this life in terms of how best to respond to God's invitation to join in the dynamics of his arriving reign.

– Werner G. Jeanrond, *Reasons to Hope*. 2020. (London: T. & T. Clark) p. 135.