

HOMILY FOR THANKSGIVING DAY
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LITTLE FLOWER CHURCH
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I am very grateful to God, to your kind pastor, Msgr. Vaghi, and to all of you for the opportunity to wish you personally a very Happy Thanksgiving! As you are aware, this is a custom that has taken place over the years – to visit with you and express, as the personal representative of the Holy Father, his closeness to you, as you gather with family and friends, to give thanks to God for all that we have received, and most especially for the gift of life itself. How blessed we all are! Pope Francis says, “If we can realize that everything is God’s gift, how happy will our hearts be! Everything is his gift...” (Homily, 13 October, 2013)

Unfortunately, we do not always express our gratitude to God, to our families, to those who are with us, who help us, to those who extend themselves to us. To say ‘thank you’ can be a humbling experience, because we express in some way our dependency upon another. All too often we take many people and many things for granted! But the Church gives us the opportunity, as it does today and every day, to say ‘thank you’ to the Lord our God. Indeed, ‘it is right to give Him thanks and praise.’ This is our solemn expression of thanksgiving, the Eucharist, in these precious moments of encounter with the Lord, in this great act of *communion* with Him.

But, as I have said, there is sometimes difficulty in saying “Thanks be to God”, as seen in our Gospel today. Ten lepers were healed, but only one returned, “praising God in a loud voice.” He realized what has happened to him. As soon as he sees Jesus, he throws himself at His feet to thank him. (Lk 17:16) The evangelist, St. Luke, wants to highlight this gesture as a sign of conversion: a recognition of what Jesus has done for him and a handing over of his life to Him. True healing - full healing – penetrates even to the heart. We could say that this last leper, the Samaritan, considered an ‘outsider’ by the Jewish people, was not only *healed*, but he was also *saved*. Perhaps, the other nine lepers thought that their healing was due merely to the fact that they were children of Abraham. The Samaritan, a foreigner, experienced his healing as a grace, as an unmerited gift, that in turn, demanded his love. Today, let us take a really good look at ourselves, surrounded by so many gifts, and see who we are, where we are at, what we have become, and what we still need to be.

Today, as we remember the Pilgrims, who about five hundred years ago, left their native land across the great ocean waters and came to the shores of this country. Hoping for a better world of freedom and prosperity, they struggled for survival in a strange land among a strange people. They were the ‘foreigners’, the migrants of long ago. We would be greatly remiss if we did not remember them today. They were received by the native population, who helped the Pilgrims to survive and to prosper. A native named Squanto, a Catholic, taught the Pilgrims how to tap maple syrup; how to use plants for medicine; how to grow corn and other fruits of the earth; and how to better catch fish. By harvest time, there was abundant food, and the Pilgrims invited their neighboring natives for a meal and a festival. They had reason to give thanks to God, who helped them survive and provided for their needs through the goodness of others. Their giving thanks was a result of God’s goodness and the fruit of an encounter.

In a sense, they anticipated the words of Pope Francis, who speaks of building a culture of encounter:

“Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to ‘go out’ from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel.” (Video message to the General Assembly of the USCCB, 14-17 November 2016)

Today is a day for communion – to be together. It is day to give thanks to Almighty God – just as the Pilgrims did – for the many blessings in our life: our family, friends, freedom, and for this beautiful country, with its abundance. Above all, we thank God for His Beloved Son, Jesus, who came to heal and to save us, and who feeds us with the Bread of Life, the Eucharist, a word which means Thanksgiving!

So, on this day, let us not forget to share what we have been given. In this way the Kingdom of God will come about in our midst and we can truly call ourselves ‘Christians.’ In this way, the world will truly believe in the message of the Gospel.