

## The Thankful Mysteries

Patricia M. Robertson

By the time the Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving, they had lost half of those who set sail for the New World. No family was untouched by death during that first harsh winter.

Arriving too late to build adequate houses, they endured the winter in rudimentary structures and with little food. They certainly had good reason to complain to God and to each other as they anxiously prepared for a second winter. And yet those who survived gave thanks amid these hardships, focusing on what remained rather than what they had lost.

Giving thanks has great power. Christian Scripture and liturgies frequently urge us to give thanks and praise. St. Paul certainly was aware of this. Scripture contains more than 180 references to thanks or thanksgiving; over a quarter (46) of these are found in Paul's letters.

He routinely thanked God for the communities to which he wrote, encouraging them in prayer and thanks: "I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you" (Philippians 1:3); "I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:4); and "In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

### Our Need, Not God's

We give thanks not because God needs us to be grateful, but because *we* need to be grateful. Gratitude has a way of chasing away the blues, lifting us out of ourselves and our depression. Gratitude replaces these with contentment, even happiness. It's not that happy people are grateful but instead the reverse: Grateful people are happier. People who complain and are constantly negative reap what they sow—greater negativity and unhappiness.

We don't have to wait for everything to be perfect before giving thanks. We can give thanks amid all our problems, focusing on the positive and thereby chasing the blues away. A pessimist can become an optimist if that person chooses this consistently.

I understand this and have experienced the impact of gratitude in my own life, helping me to be a more positive, pleasant person. It's not always easy, however. It's a challenge to be grateful when you are down on your luck and feeling miserable. It's hard to be grateful when you have just lost your job or a loved one.

It's far easier to focus on what you don't have and want than to appreciate what you do still have. I need to be reminded on a regular basis about the importance of giving thanks—lest I fall back into my old, firmly entrenched tendencies to whine and complain.

Our annual celebration of Thanksgiving is not enough. I need to be reminded every day!

In singing the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” last November, I was struck by how its five verses covered all of the major reasons for being grateful. It occurred to me that this would make a good framework for my own thanksgiving. If I could simply remember those five areas and thank God for them on a regular basis, then I would have the structure I needed to become a truly grateful person.

### **Connecting with the Rosary**

I routinely pray the mysteries of the Rosary when I am awake at night and unable to sleep. Instead of the traditional rotation of the mysteries according to the day of the week, I use the Church’s liturgical calendar to guide my choice of mysteries, starting with the joyful mysteries during Advent, the luminous mysteries during Ordinary Time, the sorrowful during Lent and the glorious during the Easter season.

The church’s calendar includes no season of Thanksgiving—perhaps because we need to give thanks every day. My five areas for giving thanks, however, fit perfectly with the five decades of the Rosary. Thus, I have now added to my Rosary what I call the “thankful mysteries.” These are in no way officially sanctioned by the Church, but offered to you from one pray-er to another.

### **For the Beauty of Creation**

This is an easy one. I’m so grateful for this beautiful earth that God has given us, the mysteries of creation and the wonders of nature. I’m grateful for trees and the colors of the seasons, for sunrises and sunsets, blue skies during the day and the moon and stars at night.

For all the flowers and birds, all God’s living creatures, I give thanks. I’m grateful for the wonderful food we have available, a richness of variety and colors, a banquet that will be surpassed only by the heavenly banquet. I’m grateful for the many natural resources in our world that provide the matter we need to build homes, power our electrical grids, keep us warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and clothes us in finery.

Truly, no one does it better than our God. The natural beauty found in creation surpasses any human artificial structure. In creation, I experience an awesome God and so it is easy to give thanks.

### **For Life and Our Time on Earth**

Human beings are truly a mystery. The more I know about the human body and spirit, the more I am in awe of God, our creator. We are wonderfully made, such a complex system of molecules and moving parts, all in balance. We can only marvel at the human brain and our ability to

master our world, and to harness its resources and the incredible discoveries of modern medicine and technology that improve our quality of life.

The arts, the beauty of dance, theater, music and incredible works of literature throughout history testify to the wonders of human life. The mystery of the human spirit, our ability to withstand hardships and overcome obstacles, our resilience—these are all sources of wonder.

Then I add the human life span and the mystery of time. Whether we live one year or 100 years, our short time on earth is all the more precious for being limited. I am thankful for the time I have and for the body I have, even with increasing limitations and aches and pains as I grow older. I am thankful for God’s time, that everything happens within God’s time frame, not my own.

### **For Human Love**

This is certainly the greatest mystery. Countless books, romance novels and songs have been written in praise of and seeking to understand the mystery we call *love*. Nothing can sink us into despair, arouse our anger or uplift us in ecstasy as love can. Relationships with family and friends—with all of their messiness, misunderstandings, misadventures and joys—are the stuff of life and are precious.

With great love also comes the potential for great sorrow. As C.S. Lewis said about his relationship with his wife, Joy Gresham, who died of cancer, “The joy now is part of the pain later” (*A Grief Observed*). It is all one piece. You can’t have one without the other.

Sorrow is the price we pay for love. It is well worth the price, or else why would so many of us continue to fall in love, have children or make new friends? In times of sorrow, I can be thankful for the fact that I have loved and been loved, thankful, in fact, for the ability to grieve because witnesses to love.

### **For Church**

This can be a hard one for me. Here I include faith and Sacred Scripture. I am so grateful for my faith that sustains me through difficult times and for God’s living word in Scripture, which guides and inspires me. It comes, however, through the form of a human institution, the Church!

The Church is much more than a human institution, or it never would have lasted this long. When I hear of scandals or a misuse of authority by priests and bishops, I am far from grateful. Then I remind myself that the Church is a sacrament of the divine, founded by Christ but still, human, fallible and a mystery.

How that ragtag group of disciples 2,000 years ago managed to be what we now call *Church* is a mystery to me. How that Church has prevailed throughout the centuries despite

trials, persecution and corruption is nothing short of miraculous. How the Church continues to bring the light of Christ to each generation is awe-inspiring and impressive.

I am thankful that the Catholic Church is large enough to embrace so many different cultures and political leanings. Those on the right and the left each can find a home here. I appreciate the “seamless garment” approach to life issues, that as Catholics we are called to be staunchly against abortion as well as the death penalty, poverty and everything that demeans and disrespects human life.

I’m grateful for our Church’s social and moral teachings that challenge me beyond my comfort zone and push me to look further at areas I might prefer to ignore. Certainly, the good in the Church far outweighs the negative.

Here more than in any other area, I am challenged to give thanks for the good I see rather than dwell on the problems. In this, I am challenged to grow in my ability to give thanks in all things, under all circumstances, as Paul instructs us. Church provides a structure, a rich tradition upon which to build my faith. Church challenges me to grow as well as provides a sense of community and belonging to something greater than myself. I am grateful for the Communion of Saints and that I am a small part of it.

### **For Jesus, God with a Human Face**

Jesus is the best gift of all. While I appreciate people from other non-Christian faith traditions and the values we hold in common, they do not have a God as close to them as our God is to us. God loved us so much that he was willing to take on human form and experience all that we experience. Our God is not a distant God who can’t relate to what it is to be human, but one like us in all things except sin (see Hebrews 4:15).

As a child attending daily Mass at a Catholic grade school, I realized that Jesus had been a child once too and thus knew what it was to be a kid. Thus I spoke with the Child Jesus to occupy my thought during the long prayers. Jesus grew up with me.

As an adult, I have been very angry with God and ready to turn my back on him because of the injustice and abuse in our world, as well as my own personal experiences of both. The thought of having to turn my back on Jesus, my friend, stopped me.

I wasn’t willing to leave Jesus and thus had to deal with God. Through Jesus I came to a new understanding of god. He is the human face of God, a God who is so incomprehensible, too awesome for us to understand. What would we do without Jesus? What would our world do without Jesus? I am ever grateful for the gift of Jesus in my life.

### **A Thankful Heart**

I have five good reasons to give thanks each and every day. Yes, there are many reasons to be thankful—details, specific people and events to fill in and expand on. But overall, I am most thankful for these five reasons.

When I start to feel down on myself or the world, I pray these thankful mysteries. They help to bring me out of myself and remind me of all the reasons I have to be grateful. If I but remember them on a daily basis, then I will have an attitude of gratitude that will lead to a joy-filled heart.

Like the early Pilgrims, I don't have to wait for everything to be perfect before I give thanks. Paul says it best, in words worth repeating: "In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

(This article was first published in *St. Anthony Messenger*, November 2010 issue.)