

DEO GRATIAS

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Deo Gratias

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by

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* Deo Gratias

The subject requested for today is gratitude. Our most perfect example of human gratitude is the Virgin Mother. She is the highest example of this most perfect virtue. She represents the essence of congruity, the special principle of fittingness. There is no virtue more fitting, more congruous, more becoming than gratitude. Tradition tells us that the words most frequently on the lips of the Holy Mother were, *Deo gratias*—let us give thanks to God. She began this deep expression of gratitude in the Magnificat and continued all her life to give praise to God. She constantly expressed to God the gratitude that was in her heart.

Gratitude is a gift. It is a gift to man from God—as all supernatural virtues must be—

*(Class lecture, September 18, 1946)

for all truly useful and beneficial powers within man must come from God. The fertile seed of gratitude was planted with the conception of the Word in Mary, and from that moment on there existed between Mary and Jesus a constant loving rivalry of greater and greater gifts. From this relationship between Jesus and Mary every true Christian should take his guidance; thus between all associates there can exist a constant friendly rivalry of greater and greater gifts.

Gratitude belongs to the cardinal virtue of justice; yet gratitude is of itself a special virtue. Although a virtue annexed to justice, still gratitude is in its own right a special virtue. All cardinal virtues have other virtues annexed to them. The name "cardinal" implies a hinge upon which other virtues hang and turn. Among those annexed to justice are such special virtues as religion, piety, friendliness, and gratitude.

Although gratitude hangs on the cardinal virtue of justice, it is not less than justice; it is more than justice. If some good is bestowed on you gratuitously, and you try to repay it in

kind—that is, good deed for good deed—the balance here established belongs to justice. But if gratitude fills your heart, you exceed justice and enter that wonderful domain of congruity, doing more than justice demands. Should you try simply to return a favor, the exchange takes on the aspect of a loan repaid.

But gratitude is not of this nature. Gratitude springs as spontaneously from the heart as did the first gift. Both gift and gratitude remain on a spiritual plane. The prescription for gratitude is preserved in our Lord's own words, Freely have you received, freely give. The ability to be grateful is truly a divine gift.

Gift is the name by which the Third Person of the Trinity is known. The word "gift" signifies the gratuitous nature of the Spirit of truth. We speak of the Holy Spirit as Gift. This Spirit, when received, manifests as special gifts. There are special gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit; but the Spirit Itself is Gift. Since the Holy Ghost Himself is given, Gift becomes a personal name.

The Holy Spirit is also named Love. Saint

Augustine says that by the gift of love many particular gifts are portioned out to the members of Christ. One of these special gifts is the capacity for gratitude. The prescription for gratitude is in the freedom of the gift. When a gift is freely given and received, there arises such joy, such happiness, such praise within the heart that it bursts forth in a song of gratitude and thanksgiving.

There are three ways in which gratitude expresses itself: in actions, in the heart, and in speech. When a person does some kindness, gives you something, makes you a gift, even serves you generously, your gratitude may express itself in responsive deeds. Your happiness and joy at the reception of his gifts may break forth into outward expressions of gratitude. Then again gratitude may be simply felt in the heart although it is not easy to keep gratitude concealed in the heart, for it is almost sure to break forth into outward expressions; because what a person has in his heart is usually revealed in actions, or in speech, which is the third way of expressing gratitude. What is in

your heart almost always comes forth into actions or speech—actions spring from your heart; speech communicates the secrets of your heart. These are the three ways by which one makes his gratitude evident.

Gratitude is expressed in actions by a returned kindness, such as doing some special favor for another. The favor is not always returned to the original donor; instead, a chain of gratefulness may be set up, going on endlessly and increasing the spirit of thanksgiving interminably—an endless chain of kindness. This sense of friendliness is preserved in the heart, but it expresses itself in actions and speech. One writer says that he who receives the boon gratefully has already begun to pay it back. This is quite true.

There are people too proud to receive a boon graciously, people who do not like to accept help from anyone. They resent offers of consideration; they reject the kindness of their neighbors, looking on deeds of generosity as an insult to their pride. The person who feels his own self-sufficiency cannot accept favors grace-

fully. It takes humility of heart to receive a boon in the proper spirit.

The absence of gratitude is a sin of omission. Ingratitude has different aspects. It is evident when a person fails to acknowledge another's kindness. This failure may appear in actions, in a coldness of heart, or in mere silence. These are the most frequent types of ingratitude.

There are, however, more subtle forms; for example, a disposition which pretends that no favor has been offered, that whatever is done is in justice due. Instead of recognizing the gratuitousness of a kindness, ingratitude makes one heedless of its generosity. The pretense that no kindness has been done is a vicious form of ingratitude. Non-recognition—that is, overlooking kindness by accepting it as one's right—is a subtle form of ingratitude. But the most insidious lack of gratitude is to misjudge a kindness and hence to interpret it as an injury. All forms of ingratitude are inexcusable, for the very reason that the mere will suffices for the repayment of the debt.

Some have tried to say that gratitude is not

a special virtue, that there are other virtues which take its place; and therefore gratitude is not necessary. For example, someone may say that as we receive our greatest benefits from God, and as we have the virtue of religion to cover this point of the honor and praise due to God in return, we do not need a virtue of gratitude besides. In other words, since gratitude to God is replaced by the virtue of religion—which is the virtue that takes charge of giving thanks and praise to God—why should there be a special virtue of gratitude? This same argument is also applied to gratitude towards one's parents; here piety seems to supply the need. And gratitude toward one's neighbors and associates seems to be supplied by the virtues of friendship and justice. But the great theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, says that no one can excuse ingratitude by saying that religion, piety, friendship, or justice takes its place.

Gratitude has a very special work and must be appreciated. It is planted in the heart by God Himself; it is received as a great gift of the

Spirit and must not be overlooked. This gift of God in the heart so fires a person, so stimulates him that he cannot help responding with expressions of gratitude. From his heart it proceeds to his actions and speech; his whole life becomes a song of praise to God. The wonderful Psalms of David are all songs of gratitude and praise. Sing the praises of God for all the wonderful benefits that you have received; and besides being grateful to God, remember to be grateful to your neighbor. Be grateful to everyone for everything, because gratitude is such a glorifying virtue.

Gratitude proceeds from the recognition of a benefactor. Many people do not like the word "benefactor," because it seems to imply an indebtedness. Strange as it may seem, one form of ingratitude is a too hurried desire to repay a favor lest the feeling of indebtedness be prolonged. Yet it is this very feeling of indebtedness, met by gratitude, that perpetuates charity—the most beautiful virtue to be experienced in the world.

Pride makes one resent the feeling that one's

benefactor is a step above him, that the benefactor stands a little higher on the ladder of perfection. It is by gratitude that one brings oneself up to the same perfection. One stands equal with the benefactor in his expressions—in action or speech—of heartfelt gratitude. Ingratitude, on the other hand, casts one down the ladder of perfection; he sinks to lower rounds of the ladder in proportion to his ingratitude. Judas was called the worst ingrate of all history, because he had the supreme opportunity to express the most glorifying gratitude. Let us never betray our Lord by rejecting an opportunity to express gratitude.

Let me read you the definition of gratitude:

*Gratitude recognizes benefits with praise and thanksgiving, returning them according to opportunity and means. Since beneficence neither supposes title in the receiver nor creates one in the giver, gratitude is a special virtue. However, dictated by man's social nature, it is imposed by the Creator, to whom it is universally due.

Here we see that gratitude is a recognition

*Catholic Dictionary, page 416

of benefits; gratitude results from an awareness of benefits. Covetousness, greed, and avarice, on the other hand, destroy memory; they tend to black out memory of benefits. But gratitude acts reversely, for it stimulates memory. The more gratitude you develop within yourself, the more you cultivate the virtue of gratitude, the more memory of good you have to acknowledge.

Although gratitude is planted in your heart by the Spirit of truth Itself, it is up to you to cultivate it by use; for the more you avail yourself of it, the more you are conscious of its inexhaustible supply. Gratitude is a divine stimulant to memory.

In the rule for prayer, you are told that when you pray desiring anything, you must believe you have received. How can you show that you believe that you have received the answer unless your prayer is one of gratitude, giving thanks for the fulfillment of your desires? Your prayer is already answered, so be grateful. Gratitude stimulates awareness in your heart; it makes you more and more conscious

of the wonderful gifts you have received. People who are greedy and covetous forget their benefits; they are blind to them, they are heedless of them, they are deaf to them. But if you cultivate the spirit of gratitude, you will be amazed at the amount of good you have to be grateful for.

So you must acknowledge your benefits with praise and thanksgiving. Give thanks to God, through the neighbor; because the Lord Himself said that even though you have done it unto the least of His creatures, you have done it unto Him. How can you show gratitude towards God unless you have a sense of gratefulness towards your neighbor as well? True gratefulness seeks expression. When your neighbor becomes your benefactor, he is playing God to you. Give him a chance to rise to this glory of generosity; then bring yourself up to these heights by your own gratitude.

Gratitude, no matter how directed, must always proceed towards God from Whom all good gifts come and Who is ever the absolute benefactor of mankind. So in returning thanks to man, you really return it to God Who has

set up in creation itself an endless chain of giving and receiving, which is a spiritual action. Saint Teresa saw this as a wonderful circle of abundance—the gifts of God flowing out from infinitude as great artery-like rivers vitalizing the earth and then returning ever again to the ocean of spiritual abundance. Thus by gratitude all God's gifts are returned to Him again as to their Source, making a holy circle of generosity, of which man becomes a great and glorious part. Returning recognition for benefits, with praise and thanksgiving, completes the holy circle.

Some people say, "I am poor; I have no opportunity to return favors; I have no means of repaying obligations. People are generous to me, but I have no way of returning these favors." Remember that gratitude is not a matter of material means; it is spiritual payment. The measure of gratitude is by the heart, and no man is too poor to express gratitude; his real poverty is ingratitude. Gratitude is man's ability to avail himself of infinity according to the rule: The more gratitude you give, the

more you have to give. The source of gratitude is God Himself.

People long for contact with infinitude; then they stifle the very means at hand to avail themselves of it, for to stifle gratitude is to renounce infinitude. Gratitude taps the ocean of love. The Holy Spirit is *infinite* love; so when you draw on gratitude at its Source you have discovered the mystical storehouse of inexhaustible supply. Gratitude is found by use—the more you use it, the more you have to draw upon. It is an inexhaustible well of refreshment. Like the widow's cruse, it never runs dry. The more you use gratitude, the more gratitude you have to use and the more good gifts you will discover to acknowledge. The grateful heart is never barren or dry of love.

Thus gratitude is a very special virtue; it is dictated by man's social nature, for it is very important to man's life in the world. Learn to be grateful to your neighbor, to accept graciously his friendliness toward you; learn never to reject or overlook a kindness, never to turn it aside, but to receive it graciously. It is a divine

gift in your own heart if you receive a boon graciously.

There are, in case you need to be reminded, certain universal benefits for which everyone should be constantly grateful. First among them is the Lord's redemption of mankind. Surely no greater gift has been bestowed upon humanity than that God Himself should come into the world—assume all the weaknesses and defects of humanity, and then overcome these in Himself. Every day of our lives we should gratefully acknowledge in our prayers this divine gift of redemption.

When the Magi came to the crib of the divine Infant, bearing their gifts, such an endless chain of gratitude was set up that the whole world was spiritualized. From that moment the depth of divine gratitude was plumbed, for God gave Himself to men. If you feel your own life to be dry of benefits, remember the greater gifts of the Lord and start off your day by being grateful for the redemption.

The second great gift which everyone should be grateful for is the Sacrament of Baptism,

which is one's own participation in spiritual life—the new birth, by which is put off all accumulation of materiality. Man is washed clean, and thus enters into that new spiritual infancy. He becomes a true child of God by the Spirit. Everyone should praise God every day for these two spiritual gifts, redemption and baptism.

Third, one should always be grateful for his steady protection. He should think of all the wonderful protection he receives constantly. It is so easy to be heedless of events that are prevented from happening. When accidents are avoided, are you heedless of the protection which has prevented them; do you say you are just lucky? Be constantly aware of the protection that follows you all the days of your life and be thankful for it. There is a constant protection that accompanies the child of God. Suppose you stub your toe: are you greatly annoyed at the inconvenience, or do you express gratitude that it is only a stubbed toe? In every event there can be found some occasion for gratitude. It is a good practice to make little

annoyances reminders of the great protection which you receive constantly. Instead of resenting events in your life, turn them directly around to prove the greater glory of God; thus you can have gratitude in the very midst of adversity. I do not wish to encourage the idea that you should be grateful to God for misfortunes, that you should accept evil as coming from God. We know very well that evil never comes from God; God cannot be the source of any evil.

Many people believe they should be grateful to God for adversities, but this is a false viewpoint. We should be grateful, not for adversities, but in adversities—straight through adversities. Evil has no part in man's true experience. Resign yourself to the good, not the evil; be grateful to God for His protection in and through trials and misfortunes. Be aware of the protection which accompanies you always, no matter where you are or what you are doing; acknowledge the truth.

As an example of this point—an example which seems congruous to the subject—let us

consider the dispositions of the three children of Israel, the three friends of Daniel: Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego. In accordance with their names, they have been interpreted as the three respective powers of the human soul: the will, the memory, and the understanding. Now these three powers of the soul—man's will, his memory, and his understanding—are constantly passing through the fire of human passion. When, however, the angel of God walks with them and is acknowledged by the spirit of gratitude, no harm befalls them. Even though the fiery furnace has been heated to an exceedingly great temperature, still they pass through untouched; for the spirit of truth is with these three.

So with every person—even when he is in the very midst of violent experience, when the passions of human life are blowing hottest against him—if he can acknowledge with the spirit of gratitude the presence of God's angel, all the fire is taken out of the flames. He feels only the cooling wind of the Holy Spirit and the refreshing dew of heavenly gifts,

and he walks through the fiery furnace untouched. Apply this to your own faculties: your upright will, your true memory, and your perfect understanding. These can go through any experience, no matter how hot its flames. Keep the spirit of gratitude even in the midst of adversity, and you can go through any experience untouched.

The Fourth, like unto God Himself, walked with these three children in the midst of the flames; and they began to sing the praises of God. They did not say, "Let's wait until we are delivered from this fire, and then, if we are safe, we will express our gratitude." They did not say, "See what misfortune has befallen us, good religious souls as we are, here in a fiery furnace! What have we to be grateful for?" They did not say this. For even while they walked through the furnace, their hearts were filled with gratitude; and they praised God's protection. They sang a wonderful song, one all would do well to read and meditate on—a hymn of praise to God. The three children of Israel sang this song in the midst of the flames. You

will find this hymn of praise—given only in the Douay version of the Bible—in chapter three of the book of Daniel. While the three children of Israel were in the midst of the flames, they began to sing:

* . . . blessed is the holy name of thy glory: and worthy to be praised, and exalted above all in all ages.

Blessed art thou in the holy temple of thy glory: and exceedingly to be praised, and exceeding glorious for ever.

Blessed art thou on the throne of thy kingdom, and exceedingly to be praised, and exalted above all for ever.

Blessed art thou, that beholdest the depths, and sittest upon the cherubims: and worthy to be praised and exalted above all for ever. Blessed art thou in the firmament of heaven: and worthy of praise, and glorious for ever.

All ye works of the Lord, bless the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.

Then, through verse after verse, these three children of Israel sang of the various works of the Lord. They gave praise to God in nature; they gave praise to God through all the crea-

*Daniel 3:52-57 Douay version

tion; they called on every created thing to sing the glory of God. If a person could but awaken in his own heart such recognition of glory, his whole world would resound with praises forever and ever.

The three children sang of the heavens which give praise and glory to God forever and ever, of the waters that are above the heavens; the powers of the Lord; the sun and moon and stars, the shower and the dew; the spirits of God; fire and heat, cold and heat, dew and hoar frosts, frost and cold, ice and snow, nights and days, light and darkness, lightnings and clouds, earth, mountains, hills, fountains, seas, rivers, fish, fowls, animals, men, priests, servants of the Lord, spirits and souls of the just, holy and humble of heart—all sing the praises and glory of God, forever and ever.

*O give thanks to the Lord, because he is good: because his mercy endureth for ever and ever.

In one of the great works on meditation and contemplation—a work that is especially written

*Book of Daniel 3:89

to stimulate memory, a book of recollection called "The Third Spiritual Alphabet"—the author speaks of the importance of gratitude in the stimulation of the memory.

He who can see in the whole panorama of experience, in all the works of creation, a song of praise to God, will find gratitude abounding on every side and the universe an open acknowledgment of God's goodness to man.

*"I can think of nothing in the world for which, if you examine it, you cannot find cause to render thanks to God. This is the office of angels who glorify and bless him in all things as their principle, attributing them all either to his justice or his mercy . . .

Everything, this writer says, everything that happens in the world, everything you say or do or discover anywhere, if examined properly, will reveal something to stimulate gratitude to God.

"I can think of nothing in the world for which, if you examine it, you cannot find cause to render thanks to God. This is the office of angels who glorify and bless him

*Third Spiritual Alphabet, by Francisco de Osuna, page 43

in all things as their principle, attributing them all either to his justice or his mercy and rendering him infinite praise. It would suffice to make you love this practice if you considered how God is served by being thanked for all things and that the continual remembrance of it benefits your soul immensely. To answer people in such a manner edifies them, prevents your speaking idle words, and makes you utter many useful, devout, truthful sayings which savour more of heaven than of this world and cannot fail to bring you a rich reward."

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