

# THREE

## THANKSGIVING



*Not merely one facet of the eucharistic mystery, thanksgiving is its very center. Without it, there is no Mass.*

—Lucien Deiss, *It's the Lord's Supper: Eucharist of Christians*, p. 67

*In the prayer of praise, the Berakah, he [Jesus] does not simply thank the Father for the great events of past history, but also for his own "exaltation."*

—Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 10

### PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

Our word *eucharist* comes from one of the Greek words used to translate the Hebrew word *berakah*, to bless. The Greek word *eucharistia* means "thanksgiving," while the Greek word *eulogia*, the other word used to translate *berakah*, means, "to praise and say



good things about.” Both of these words describe different aspects of our relationship with God. *Eulogia*, or praise, refers to the pure praise we offer to God just because God is God; we are beloved creatures; God is creator, source of life itself. We offer thanksgiving, *eucharistia*, for what God has done for us and given to us. The list is as long as the two Testaments, for each book of the Bible recounts to us God’s mighty deeds. God has loved us, given us life, rescued us, guided us, supported us, sustained us, challenged us, saved us, rejoiced over us, fed us, forgiven us, and walked with us. Thanksgiving highlights our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

When we stand before God among God’s people, the Mass gives us words to recognize what God has done for us. Prayers such as the “Holy, Holy,” with its focus on the holiness and greatness of God, are a good example of eulogia; the eucharistic prayers, which recount God’s great deeds, are excellent examples of thanksgiving. At every Mass, the priest and the rest of the assembly engage in the following dialogue:

The Lord be with you.

*And also with you.*

Lift up your hearts.

*We lift them up to the Lord.*

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

*It is right to give God thanks and praise.*

In this short story, Bernadette reflects on this dialogue and speaks of taking time prior to arriving at church to remember and give thanks for our graced moments.



“Really,” I thought as once again I said those words, “so what am I thankful for?” It’s a question that always makes me stop and think. It’s so easy to just rattle those words off without thinking of them. So now, whenever I’m on my way to Mass, I review my week or my day, looking for what I’m grateful to God for. It’s a wonderful habit to develop because gratitude is our fundamental attitude at eucharist. Gratitude is a great antidote for our world’s cynicism and greed. You can’t be grateful and cynical at the same time.

In the last chapter, we spoke of the importance of preparing carefully for worship, by remembering our graced history. This remembering usually evokes gratitude in us. Perhaps you have read Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s lovely fairy tale, *The Little Prince*. The fox explains, “If you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you.” Preparing for eucharist by becoming conscious of what we are thankful for, like preparing for the encounter with an intimate friend, makes us more receptive to and enhances our experience of eucharist. Standing in gratitude before God helps us experience the divine presence more fully. Terry wrote the following about being grateful at Mass.

You know they tell you to “sleep on it” when you have a problem. Well, that works for me sometimes. What I do more often is take it to Mass. Even if God doesn’t tell me what to do about it during the service, I leave feeling refreshed and can usually see my problem with more perspective. When I have a problem, I kneel as soon as I have found a place, and pray, “Thank you,



God, for what you are already doing about my problem. I am willing to receive your guidance." The eucharist is all about gratitude, and I find that expressing thanks brings me closer to God and helps me remember all the other times God has helped me.

## FREELY GRANTED

God grants so much to us freely. *Grant* means "to give someone something or allow them to have something, especially as a favor or a privilege." It is so easy for us human beings to take people, things, and God for granted. We expect certain events without really giving them much attention or become bored with the expected. In her book *Prayer*, Sr. Joyce Rupp writes,

Because the Mass is a celebration filled with formal, rote prayers, they can become boringly familiar with repetition, causing our minds and hearts to flee elsewhere . . . . It takes real effort to be attentive and responsive if we are to experience spiritual union with God through liturgical prayer. Fortunately, there are always times when I am reawakened to the spiritual potency of the eucharist in spite of my unawareness.

One day when I held out my hands to receive communion, there was no more bread. I felt like a little bird with its mouth open, with nothing to be had. I stood and waited for what seemed an eternity until the eucharistic minister returned with the remaining consecrated wafers. As I returned



to my place, gratitude for the gift I had received encompassed me. (*Prayer*, p. 88)

Being human, we will, at times, take the gift of eucharist for granted. After all, we can go almost anywhere in the world, at almost any time, and join with others in the eucharistic celebration. And, in most places, it is not difficult or dangerous to attend Mass. To keep from taking this incredible gift for granted, we need an attitude of gratitude. Then, when we do slip in our thankfulness, we will, like Joyce, have many experiences that bring us back.

## MY YOKE IS EASY

At a recent parish mission, Nancy asked at the end of each night if anyone wanted to share a story about the eucharist. On the last evening, a woman came to the front with a sheet of typed notes. "I wanted to be sure I got it down correctly," she said. "I'm so grateful to God." This is her story.

My name is Denise Robison; I attend St. Mary's parish in Cranbrook, and I am a convert.

One morning I received a call from Rose, a member of our parish who was a eucharistic minister. She explained to me that she would be moving to Calgary soon and that she had been praying for someone to take her place at Rocky Mountain Lodge, a nursing home, where she was one of the leaders of a communion service.

And guess what? It was my name that came to her mind during her prayer. "What?" I think I



said. "Oh Rose, I don't think so. I feel comfortable with the youth, that's where I feel God wants me to be—yeah, definitely with the youth." Very patiently she said, "Okay, but would you at least please pray about it?" I agreed, prayed about it for a couple of days, and when I didn't "hear" anything from God, didn't think about it again. Until . . .

Two weeks later the phone rings, and guess who? Rose. "Hi Denise, your name just won't leave my mind, it's the only name that keeps coming to me to do the communion Service at the lodge. I think that you are the one." "I really don't think so," I said. "Those places smell bad, you know, they drool. Oh, Rose, I really don't think I can do it." Well, she kept talking until I finally agreed that I would give it a try. I'm thinking, okay, maybe I could do a probation period or something until she realizes I wasn't the one to continue.

So I arrive the first time, take a big deep breath (with lip balm under my nose to perhaps cut the smell), and pray like mad, "This isn't really where God wants me. This isn't really where you want me, right Lord?"

Well let me tell you, did the Lord ever have a surprise in store for me. A gift, WOW!!! What a blessing those older people are in my life, and what a blessing they are to our community. They have touched my heart deeply and are to be truly treasured. That was over eight years ago, and I'm still at the Green Home bringing the Lord to these special people. However, this was just a part of God's plan for me. He wasn't finished yet.



Denise pauses here, looking like she is about to cry. She takes a few deep breaths and continues:

I believe that through this experience God was preparing me to care for my own mother, who was at this time in the early stages of dementia. She would be placed in the nursing home soon. Being eucharistic minister for the other seniors first helped me be there for my mom. I am so thankful to God. I am so very thankful that Rose was persistent and gave me the call—twice. And I'm thankful that I answered.

God's will is always for the highest good of all. God's desire for us is to live freely in love. When we have a sense that God is calling us to a particular path or choice, we may think, as Denise did, that this will not be a good thing for us. Yet, if we remember that Jesus told us, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30), we can respond to the divine call with gratitude, and then explore further how and when and where it is to be accomplished.

Many, if not all, of the other stories in this book involve gratitude to God. As well as the story we have just read, the next two could also easily find a home in the chapter on eucharist as transformation. They were sent by email when we put out the word that we were collecting stories for this book.

I'm Loretta, a born, baptized, and confirmed Catholic who lost my Christian faith by grade 12, knew only that God must exist when I started university, and was drawn into a bible study through a friend involved in Campus Christian Outreach. I found the studies incredibly frustrating—anyone



could pick out the answers to the questions if they read the scripture verses, but so what? Nothing touched my heart. I continued to go to Mass and receive the eucharist regularly, not really understanding why, because it really meant nothing to me: Jesus could not possibly be man and God . . . if he even ever existed.

Yet I was drawn to apply for a mission trip to Poland at the end of my second year of university and was eventually granted permission to go. It sounds crazy, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that knowing Jesus personally and living within his Catholic Church was right for the Poles. It just was not for me. It was a six-week mission, and about the third week—like we did every day—we had daily Mass in the small chapel of the convent we were living in. Like every day, I went up and received the eucharist, went back to my spot, knelt down, and was given the gift of faith! Instantaneously! I could believe in Jesus, he was my Lord and savior, he was real!

It did not stop there. I felt a command to stand up, on top of my chair, and proclaim my new faith in Jesus. I resisted for a time, as only about four people out of the more than twenty on the mission even knew I did not believe in Jesus. Finally I did, and I shocked a few people, I can tell you!

This gift of faith, at that time, did not extend to faith in the Catholic Church and its teachings, but over the next few years I grew in faith in the Church and its teachings, as well, until I could assent to all its teachings, even those I still did not understand or quite agree with.

Would it surprise you to know that fourteen years later, I find that receiving the eucharist





just once a week is not nearly enough, and that it is what sustained me through many trials and tribulations? I am so grateful to our patient and faithful God.

And Moira King wrote this.

At age twenty-five, a tug by the Holy Spirit caused me to make a major turnaround from the business fast lane to embark on a “Come and See” program with the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception. My life was being redirected.

Although my time living in religious community was brief, I would come to realize that in his loving patience, God graciously waits for us to get to know him. The time with my religious sisters greatly enhanced my spiritual formation. I looked forward to lauds and vespers and realized how special these morning and evening prayers had become for me. I was grateful that I could quietly “sit at the Father’s feet” in love and adoration and then share so intimately in the sacrament of the eucharist.

*Adoration means entering the depths of our hearts in communion with the Lord, who makes himself bodily present in the eucharist. In the monstrance, he always entrusts himself to us and asks us to be united with his presence, with his risen body. (Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Roman Clergy, March 2, 2006)*

At twenty-nine, I was married and back in the business world, but living life differently. This time, I was consciously continuing the journey of great love and deep understanding that our heavenly Father has for us. This way of being



with God helped me through times of adversity as well as times of joy. I give thanks daily for the many blessings that he has bestowed on me and for loving me so much!

Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: "Ask him to grant you the grace of knowing him, the love of loving him, the courage to serve him. Seek him fervently."

I want to keep my focus on Christ and experience daily love and adoration for him. One of my important epiphanies was realizing that it is prayer, the sacrament of the eucharist and eucharistic adoration that provide me with the guidance, courage, strength, and love to serve him and others more fully.

## FINDING OUR WAY IN THE DARK

Imagine these scenarios. Your young brother-in-law has been having headaches that are attributed to a disk problem in the neck. The pain intensifies. A CAT scan reveals a massive brain tumor. Subsequent surgery brings the prognosis—three to six months. You are grieving, angry, devastated, and wondering, "Why?"

Your spouse of fifteen years announces that she's leaving. Your whole future crumbles before you. Your hopes, dreams, and plans dissipate in the storm of intense loss and grieving. You are angry, confused, profoundly wounded.

In these kinds of situations, praise and thanksgiving seem almost impossible. Lament, cries of anger



to God, pleadings for consolation in pain seem much more appropriate and certainly more natural. But praise? Thanks? For what are we thanking God at such moments of soul-searing pain? How can we praise God in the darkness of life?

First, we thank God just for being God. As one person commented recently, "We praise God in the morning, not for what God has done today (it may turn out to be a perfectly awful day), but just because God is God." We praise God just for being. This is God's first and enduring gift to us.

Second, we thank God for the kind of presence God manifests in our history. God is always faithful. In Jesus, we recognize the fullness of God's gift of self, for Jesus, in his self-giving, joins us in everything we are but our sinfulness. He joins us in our misery, our hopelessness, and our feelings of abandonment. But God never abandoned Jesus, not even to death, the experience that bears the ultimate potential for cutting us off from God. Like the women at the cross, God endured in love death's agony with Jesus and raised him to new life. If our God did not abandon Jesus in the face of death, why would our God abandon us in the face of our own personal hells, whether they are chosen, inherited, or stumbled into? Why would God turn his face from us when we are suffering, anguishing, or devastated? This is the God of mercy and compassion, the God who treasures us more than the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air, the God who carves us in the palm of his hand! As we thank God for this faithfulness throughout history, our faith assures us that God's tenderness will embrace us even in our darkest misery.



When we are in the darkness, it's easy to lose sight of the horizon. Darkness obliterates familiar landmarks and turns our world topsy-turvy; hostility and fear hem us in. Praising and thanking God restores our horizons. Even if pain still dims our sight, gratitude to God, like the first thin light of dawn, restores perspective. Our sense of direction restored, we can walk forward, choosing a way that honors our identity as followers of Christ.

Thanking God also restores our memory. In times of great anguish, we easily forget everything but our pain. Praise and thanksgiving force us to look through our turmoil to see the signs of goodness all around us, which are signs that our God graces us each day with glimmers of the fullness of the kingdom. In remembering, we recognize that we have reason to hope. What God has done in the past, God will do again. Pain is not the final word.

But such praise will not come easily if we have not developed the habit of praise in all seasons. The Roman Catholic tradition marks the beginning and end of each day with the prayer of praise and intercession called the Liturgy of the Hours, or Morning and Evening Prayer. Unchanging elements of these worship services are the Canticle (Song) of Zechariah (Lk 1:67–79), and the Canticle of Mary (Lk 1:46–55), respectively. Praying (or singing) these canticles every day reminds us of God's wondrous deeds, particularly of God's fidelity to the poor and broken. On some mornings or evenings, our sense of identity with the original pray-er may indeed be strong. But on other days these same prayers remind us most powerfully that "the dawn from on high will break upon us, to



give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:78–79). Then hope, newborn or restored, gives us one more reason to sing God's praise.

## THE LOOK AND FEEL OF GRATITUDE

How do you experience and show gratitude? Some echo the hymn "How Can I Keep From Singing?" Others turn inward and speak their thanks in silence. Nancy has just finished some research on spirituality for extroverts. A number of them said that they looked forward to the times in the Mass when they engaged with others, sang, or made responses. During these times, it was easier to express gratitude. These extroverts found the more reflective parts of the celebration less meaningful or even boring. On the other hand, some introverts say they try to stay in reflective mode through the whole Mass. They can experience gratitude more fully in this way.

Brain research shows that introverts and extroverts use very different parts of their brains. We believe Jesus was an "omnivert." He could access both internal and external energy, using all parts of his brain. He delighted in large groups of people yet also spent much time alone in introverted prayer. We will always have an introverted or extroverted inclination, and we need to honor these God-given ways of being. Allowing the Holy Spirit to help us open to the unfamiliar energy and become omniverts, however, will assist us to be more like Jesus.



The experience of eucharist can help us here. The Mass is a wonderful flow between extroverted and introverted energy. If we live in that flow with faith and patience, we will learn how to thank God through inner reflection as well as outer engagement.

## FROM SAYING “THANK YOU” TO BEING THANK YOU

In our relationship with God, how do we address the very real dilemma that we encounter often in our human relationships? Someone does something utterly wonderful for you, something totally unearned. Our natural response is to say, “What can I do in return? What can I give them to show my thanks?” And so, in response to these wonderful acts of God, we offer ourselves—our lives—as our expression of thanksgiving.

Sr. Mary Angelica, ninety-nine years old, eagerly anticipated the eightieth anniversary of being a sister. The plans were set for three sisters to celebrate significant anniversaries in the summer. But as her February anniversary date approached, she realized that it was important that she renew her vows on the anniversary of the actual date, eighty years ago, when she made her first profession. And so it was done.

On her special day, Sr. Angelica remembered those eighty years of service to God as a member of her community. She has been a vowed religious longer than the lifetimes of many people. At Mass, during the Preparation of the Gifts, Sr. Angelica, in



love and gratitude, renewed her vows with such clarity that all heard. And, then, she heard God speak to her; "Thank you, Angelica." She was overwhelmed! God was grateful to her for her "yes." After the eucharistic celebration, a glowing Sr. Angelica, not able to contain her joy, shared with one of her sisters her totally unexpected response from the God of love.

At the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, we pray Psalm 116.

What shall I return to the Lord  
for all his bounty to me?  
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice  
and call on the name of the Lord.  
I will pay my vows to the Lord in the  
presence of all his people. (vv. 12, 17, & 18)

This phrase "thanksgiving sacrifice" or "sacrifice of praise" refers to the only gift we can give to God in return for all that God has done for us: our very lives. Some of us give our lives as vowed religious men and women or as diocesan priests. Most of us do so as married people; some as single people. Our baptismal vows, those vows we all hold in common, call each of us to give his or her life back to God. When we were baptized, we were joined to Christ, who surrendered himself totally to the Father in response to all the Father had done for him. Our ultimate act of thanksgiving, of eucharist, is not words of thanksgiving, but this same self-surrender.



## YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

In 1993, I attended the World Youth Day gathering in Denver, Colorado, with a number of young people from the former Gravelbourg Diocese. As many of you know, the day before the Papal Mass, the pilgrims hike to the designated field and sleep out under the stars. The night in the foothills of the Rockies was chilly, so some of our pilgrims didn't sleep much. The next day, due to the heat, tiredness, and dehydration, three of our pilgrims fainted. One even had an appendicitis attack.

During the Papal mass, I found myself holding an intravenous bottle for one of our youth in one hand and some shade cover in the other hand. I happened to look up, and I saw a priest distributing communion some distance away. "Hmm," I thought, "I may not be able to receive communion. I need to stay with this young person." But then I realized, "I am *being* eucharist—this is my body and blood given for you." Joy filled my heart! At that point I would have been okay with not receiving communion, but one of the young gentlemen in our group came and took my place. As I walked up to receive communion, I felt gratitude in my heart for the inspiration that had come to me. We are called both to receive and to become eucharist.

—Bernice Daratha, O.S.U.  
Regina, Saskatchewan

The transformation that the Spirit works on us in the celebration of eucharist is destined for our everyday, everywhere life. Embraced by Christ during the celebration of Mass—guided, transformed,





nourished, healed, and reconciled—we are drawn into his self-surrender of praise and thanksgiving. United with him, we are then sent forth to do and be the same, through our words and actions, for those we encounter on our journey through life. We become Eucharist. We become what we eat: Body and Blood of the Lord, broken and poured out for the life of the world.

## Closing Prayer

*From Psalm 9, with responses by Nancy Reeves*

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;

I will tell of your wonderful deeds.

I will be glad and exult in you;

I will sing praise to your name, O Most High  
(vv. 1–2).

*I am grateful to you for so many reasons;*

*I could give thanks to you continually,  
and never come to the end, O God.*

*You have been my support, even before I was born.*

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,  
a stronghold in times of trouble.

And those who know your name put their trust in  
you,

for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek  
you (vv. 9–10).



*I give you thanks freely, my God.  
May my words and actions always show gratitude  
for your wondrous love, faithfulness, compassion, and  
guiding hand;  
and especially for the gift of Jesus in my life.*

Amen.

## Questions to Journal and Discuss

1. How do you usually express gratitude? Do you tend to be more extroverted or introverted?
2. What is one of your favorite hymns of gratitude? Think of it or sing it, and explore how it affects you on an emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual dimension.

## Spiritual Activity

Read Luke 17:11–19. Move into the story in your imagination, first becoming one of the lepers who did not return to Jesus. What was that experience like? Then, move into the story again, becoming the leper who did return, and explore that experience.

Afterward, compare the two.

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From Linnea Good: "Psalm 95: Stand On the Rock and Shout!"  
Words and music at [www.linneagood.com](http://www.linneagood.com).