

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – October 9, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 975 words

If you tour the great old churches in pretty much any part of Europe, it won't take long before you notice heart-shaped medallions near a special altar or holy image, given by the faithful in gratitude for answered prayers. If you go to an art museum in Mexico, you will often see an exhibit of little plaques painted in a charming folk style, depicting Christ, the Blessed Mother, or another saint coming to someone's aid, with the story of what took place written on it as well; these also were made in thanksgiving for answered prayers. If you visit the great Mission Church in Boston, you will see racks of crutches left by those who received cures from their physical ailments through the intercession of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. And, if you go to a town named Batalha, not far from Fatima, in Portugal, you'll see an entire monastery, built in a glorious gothic style by a king in the fourteenth century, who had promised the Blessed Virgin Mary that he would do so if he won a war. Obviously he won.

Down through the ages, the faithful have felt it necessary to express their thanksgiving to God and the saints in tangible and often touching ways for cures that they received and for other answered prayers. These offerings are known as "ex-votos" – Latin words that mean, "from a vow made"; and the vow usually involves a promise to make some concrete offering in gratitude for answered prayer. What's important ultimately is not the size or cost of the offering, but the fact that there is one. And this applies to any answered prayer, whether a vow or promise was made or not. This is the story of today's gospel: only one of the ten healed lepers thought to go back and give thanks for the astonishing healing that he experienced. This was recorded in the gospel and remains to this day as a sort of monument of thanksgiving for answered prayer, much like those ex-votos we see in various churches. But do we see ourselves more in the one who went back to give thanks, or in the nine ingrates who went on their way?

The alleluia verse for this Mass quotes St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and brings our reflection to a deeper level: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you". It is God's will that we should be thankful: and not only when our prayers are answered, but always! In other words, our entire life should become a sort of monument of gratitude. Again, are we like the one or more like the other nine? And then, do we make it a habit of being grateful apart from when special prayers are answered, to include even those times when we meet difficulties and tragedy in life? Gratitude changes our demeanor; it often becomes visible to others. It opens us outward to God and to others, reversing our tendencies to be overly introspective and even brooding and bitter about our crosses and challenges. It is the will of God for us to be thankful, and we are invited this week to reflect on the virtue of gratitude and begin to adjust our lives accordingly.

I suppose it's easy, though, for me, or someone far greater like St. Paul, to tell you to be thankful. But it's quite another thing for any of us to put that into practice. And this is because, all too often, we allow ourselves to be guided by our feelings instead of by our intellects. I know that God desires thanksgiving from me in all circumstances; but right now, perhaps, I just don't feel very grateful. And so I might just leave it at that. But you parents who have had to get up in the middle of the night to change diapers and calm crying babies know a thing or two about overcoming feelings and doing what is right and needful in a given moment. And that lesson needs to be applied to our spiritual lives as well. Like with any virtue, we can only acquire a habit of gratitude through repeated practice and deliberate choices that flow from our intelligence – and not necessarily from our feelings and emotions.

This week, then, I'd like to propose two concrete acts of thanksgiving that, if undertaken consistently, will help you to be more grateful in other areas and circumstances as well. They are

the practices of making a thanksgiving after Mass and a thanksgiving after meals. After Mass: Do you leave the minute that priest and ministers reach the door? Do you start talking right away after the hymn concludes? Or do you kneel and say some prayers in thanksgiving for this new encounter with the Lord in his house? And then, when having a meal: Grace before meals should be a habit by now, I hope, but do you say grace after meals also? There are different versions of the traditional prayer, but one begins, “We give thee thanks, almighty God, for these and all thy blessings...”. Whatever prayer you use, that deliberate pause to give thanks to God for something so ordinary as a sandwich will help to reinforce in you a general attitude of thanksgiving. Thus, it will carry over to other areas of your life as well.

Look to our dear Blessed Mother for her assistance. That golden heart on our statue of Mary, in fact, was a common type of ex-voto in France; and all of us are included spiritually in her Immaculate Heart, which always gives thanks to God. May she intercede for us, especially so that we may become more thankful in all circumstances, and so that the virtue of thanksgiving may transform our demeanors and make us holy. Amen.