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On Gratitude

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 21, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

There is so much to be grateful for this year. But, before we get to that, I wish to reflect a moment about gratitude and why it may be the most vital human attitude, especially in our contemporary culture.

Ours is an acquisitive culture. Indeed, acquisitiveness may be its most dominant feature. We are endlessly instructed via television advertising, newspaper advertising, through conversations with friends, that if we only go to this new fancy restaurant, or drive this particular new car, or purchase this hair care product or laundry detergent, or secure that corner office, or indulge this particular appetite, or don this new jacket, then we shall be happy. This deepest desire of the human heart, the desire to love and be loved, to be happy, has been cheapened into a desire to be loved and happy on account of something for purchase, something extraneous.

Often we hear that young people today grow up with a sense of entitlement. I have seen this phenomenon and it is truly ugly. But, is it really a sense of entitlement? I believe that every human being *qua* human being is entitled to many things, and not only life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I believe every human being is entitled to those things necessary for life, health care, food, shelter, a living wage, respect for their innate dignity. But, what young people feel entitled to is stuff, those sneakers, those Ipods and Ipads, that jewelry, none of it earned by the fruit of their labor and all of it at an affordable price, irrespective of whether or not slave wages went into the production of the product that is craved. This is not really entitlement so much as it is acquisitiveness democratized. It is profoundly ugly. As Brad Gregory has written, our culture seeks not the Good, but the goods.

There are seven deadly sins, and it would seem that greed and envy are the principal culprits in this tale of acquisitiveness. But, I do not actually think people want all their stuff for its own sake so much as for the status that stuff confers. We are not dealing here only with greed and with envy, but with the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, with pride.

Pride is the most difficult sin to counteract. If we are lustful, we can try and develop the counter-virtue of chastity. If we are greedy, we can cultivate its opposite virtue of generosity. If we are wrathful, we can try to be kind. But, humility is the virtue sitting opposite pride, and it is difficult to cultivate humility. The second one pays attention to one?s own effort to be humble, voila, it is melted by pride like a snowflake in the hand. No, to counteract pride and cultivate humility, we must place ourselves in a stance of gratitude. Gratitude frustrates greed, it chastens lust, it quells anger. Gratitude permits envy no room to roam, it robs the glutton of his urges, and it compels the slothful to get off their duffs and share their abundant gifts. Gratitude kills pride. It is the true posture of the Christian and of all religious believers and, indeed, of anyone who aspires to be humane. ?Until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx, only gratitude will be gushing from it,? wrote Joseph Brodsky. I wish, today, to make his words my own, grateful (how perfect!) that Brodsky had a poet?s genius and that he shared that genius with the rest of us non-poets.

I am grateful, first and foremost, for the great gift of faith. If I awoke tomorrow and had mysteriously been transformed in the night into a Republican, or into a southerner, or into a scientist, or into someone very rich, I suspect I would still be recognizable to myself and to others. But, if I awoke tomorrow and my faith had left me,

I would be unrecognizable to myself and to others. And, while there is a certain amount of work and focus that goes into cultivating one?s faith, faith itself is a gift, a pure gift: The sower sows His seed. I did not cause the tomb to be empty, nor could I have discovered the fact of the empty tomb on my own but only through the ministry of the Church through the ages, bringing that singularly Good News down to me twenty centuries later.

I am very grateful for my parents. My mother has gone to God, but she taught me so much in life, most especially the moral obligation to be intelligent. She nurtured a questioning mind and habits of thought that made me intellectually curious. My Dad has the biggest, most forgiving heart of anyone I have ever met, our daily phone calls are always a highlight of the day and our time together precious beyond measure. Both parents also taught me the value of hard work. And, the kids, well, Bernie, Clementine and Ambrose make working from home a joy and it is a good thing in life to have beasts for whom it is enough to walk through the door to make them happy.

I am grateful for my friends. You know who you are. You make life worth living.

I am so grateful for my work. NCR and Catholic University?s Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies and the Tablet have become my professional home and no one could ask for more in the way of support and challenge. My conversations with colleagues always invite me to re-examine issues, they point out mistakes and encourage me to go deeper into certain issues. They teach me things I did not know and introduce me to people and ideas I had not previously encountered. They give me a platform from which to address issues about which I care deeply. I have the best jobs in the world.

I am grateful for you, dear readers, and wish you and your loved ones a very happy Thanksgiving.

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