

GIVING THANKS

AN ESSENTIAL EXPRESSION OF FAITH



DEMOKRATYKA
VEMKAR TOPICAL SERIES

BY THE ORDER OF
THE VERY REVEREND
FATHER MESROP PARSAMYAN
PRIMATE



Published by the Bishop Zgon Trust Fund
of the Diocese of the Armenian Church
of America (Eastern), New York



ST.VARTANPRESS2023

Written by Fr. Avedis Kalayjian

GIVING THANKS

An Essential Expression of Faith

Imagine you are at a birthday party for a ten-year-old child. Family and friends have gathered around. Ani, the proud mom, had mentioned to you in a previous conversation that little Sevan had been bugging her for months about a toy Sevan wanted. You had a feeling today was going to be the day. But you weren't sure. Then the big moment came. Sevan picked up the gift, tagged "From Mom & Dad." Waiting in anticipation, all you had to do was watch Sevan's face as the wrapping was ripped from the box. No need to look at the gift for confirmation - Sevan's face spoke for itself. Jumping up from the couch and running to embrace mom and dad told the rest of the story. You smile. Not only because you remember a similar moment from your own childhood, but because seeing a reaction of pure joy and gratitude is touching to witness.

Witnessing authentic expressions of gratitude is so moving that it even occupies its own space as part of a growing phenomenon of online "reaction videos." Millions are tuning in to see strangers react to strangers in dramatic fashion through various scenarios and situations. These situations range from gifting strangers' money, unexpectedly buying someone's groceries, or giving generously to a person in need. There are knowns and unknowns as to how a particular person may react in face of unwarranted (or unexpected) generosity, and that constitutes a

large part of the drama created by each unique situation. However, there are certain aspects to nearly every reaction that create a common experience among the recipients. Watch enough of these videos, and patterns start to develop. When offered a free gift people tend to react first with disbelief, confusion, and even suspicion. But as realization settles in, as they wrap their heads around the reality of what just happened, joy sets in and then gratitude closely follows. The authentic reaction is there. Everyone can witness it. If you let it, it has the power to melt your heart.

THANKSGIVING AS AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH

I will give thanks to you, LORD,
with all my heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and rejoice in you;
I will sing the praises of your name,
O Most High.

Holy *Badarak* of the Armenian Church

One of the most meaningful tenets we hold as Christians is that giving thanks is a simple, yet profound, act of faith. Thanksgiving involves not only being aware of a gift; but responding to it. It is impossible to offer genuine thanks to the Lord without first recognizing the presence of God in our lives and all that He has done for us. From birth to salvation, what-

ever is good and true comes from the Lord. The Holy Scriptures, the liturgical life of the Church, and our own life experience bear this out. For this very reason, *we ought not* (and as a church, *we do not*) consider thanksgiving to be a duty or an obligation, but rather a natural reaction to God's bounty. When we give thanks, we do so freely, by our own will, and in recognition and appreciation of God. Giving thanks, therefore, serves as a confession of faith as well as an act of gratitude. It helps ground us. It centers us in our faith. It draws us closer to God. It allows us to consider and contemplate our role as children of the Lord, and as beneficiaries of the gifts bestowed upon us by our Heavenly Father.

ARMENIAN ROOTS

I will give thanks to you with praises,
O God my God.

Psalm 43

The classical Armenian word for thanksgiving is *kohootyoon*, which in addition to 'thanksgiving' and 'gratitude' also carries the meaning of 'contentment,' 'satisfaction,' and even 'blessing.'

With the usage of the Armenian *kohootyoon*, we understand that our gratitude towards the Lord is in response to His *perfect* gifts, His perfect abundance, that completes our relationship with the Father; as we were once hungry, and now *perfectly* filled. It is in a state of contentment, therefore, that we humbly acknowledge and give thanks for God's gifts bestowed on us.

JESUS GAVE THANKS

We remember and celebrate Christ's giving of thanks each Sunday during *Holy Badarak* as the priest lifts up the host and chalice, recalling the actions of Jesus during the Last Supper.

Christ is described as giving thanks a number of times in the Gospels. (Mt 11:25, Lk 10:21, Mt 15:36, Mk 8:6, Jn 11:41-42, Lk 22:17-18, Lk 22:19, Mt 26:27 & Mk 14:23.) It is clear from the Holy Scriptures that Jesus frequently expressed gratitude to God the Father. He gave thanks before the feeding of the five thousand, the raising of Lazarus, at the Passover meal in the Gospel of John, and during the Last Supper. On each of these occasions something miraculous followed. He was thankful for food, that truth had been revealed, and that the Father heard His prayers. We can follow Christ's example by giving thanks for the same things encountered in our own lives. For example, the sustenance the Lord provides us each day (our daily bread) is indeed a blessing. While our daily meals are not miracles in the same way the "Feeding of the Multitudes" was, nevertheless, as we recognize God as the source of our physical sustenance we feel compelled to offer thanks. This is even more important when it comes to our spiritual sustenance, as we can express gratitude with confidence that the Lord has heard our prayers.

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

All who worship the Lord,
bless the God of gods, sing praise to him
and give thanks to him, for his mercy
endures forever.”

Daniel 3:90

Examples of thanksgiving abound in the Old Testament. Frequently, praise acts in conjunction with, and is an inextricable part of, expressions of gratitude. In the verse above, the three youths sentenced to death by the king for refusing to worship false idols emerge from the superheated furnace unscathed. They proceed to offer a song of praise that culminates in an expression of thanksgiving (Daniel 3). In their song is found a litany of blessings to God from every creature, from every corner of the earth, from inanimate objects to animals, to human beings, in short, from all of creation.

Similar litanies are found in the book of Psalms. In fact, an entire subset of Psalms is considered “Psalms of Thanksgiving”.

Ps. 28:7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped.
My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.

Ps. 118:29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

One observes in these psalms references to protection, trust, dependency, and the goodness of God. These are all things that we benefit from in our daily lives and keep us in a state of hope until we reach the Kingdom ourselves. In the meantime, recognizing the source of all of these things as God, the creator, gives us occasion to praise his name and joyfully offer thanks as we are beneficiaries of His many bounties.

Consider these verses from the book of Tobit, part of the Orthodox biblical canon (though not part of the biblical canon of the Jewish or Protestant traditions). Tobit, after regaining his sight, offers a lengthy Song of Praise and Thanksgiving. In it, he stresses God's enduring greatness, majesty, and loyalty to His people. Here is a brief excerpt:

As for me, I exalt my God, my soul exalts the King of heaven, and rejoices all the days of my life. Let all sing praise to his greatness, let all speak and give thanks in Jerusalem.

Tobit 13:7-8

“AND BE THANKFUL”

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with

gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:15-17

As we mature as Christians and gain wisdom in this world, we see clearly the value of the inner peace that Christ grants to His flock. We also, day by day, learn of the evils of this world and the consequence of living in a fallen state. We understand as Christians that there can be but one savior, one redeemer, and one benefactor. As a result, when we live for Christ, when the Gospel dwells in our hearts, souls and minds, when we do everything, as St. Paul says, in the name of the Lord Jesus, we do so with full knowledge that through Christ we are saved. Through the blood of Christ, all of humanity is saved. That little seed of faith the Lord planted in us, from the time we were in the womb, it sprouted, and blossomed and gave fruit. And it is with gratitude in our hearts that we declare "From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God." (Ps 22:10) Because the Lord is our Lord, the savior is our savior and the redeemer is our redeemer, we enjoy the full inheritance that our heavenly Father offers. Indeed, we cannot expect or ask for more from God, and cannot conceive of anything more significant to be grateful for.

OFFERING THANKSGIVING AS A CHURCH

“Let us give thanks to the beneficent God for giving us, his creatures, the abundance of the harvest of fruits and vegetables and plants.”

Deacon’s Litany from the
Blessing of the Grapes Service

Coming together to pray and worship as a Church gives us even more opportunity to offer thanks, in addition to our personal prayers. In the service of the Blessing of the Grapes, we find a short but impactful litany offered by the deacon, which precedes a very rich and profound prayer of thanksgiving, offered by the officiant. This litany makes a number of important statements of faith while at the same time entreating the congregation to be thankful. It declares God to be helpful, recognizes God as creator (and we as God’s creatures), and reminds us that He provides what we need and more. The litany specifies fruits, vegetables, and plants. This theme continues in a prayer by St. Nersess Shnorhali, who reminds us of the days of creation from a barren earth to one that sustains all living things. He invokes the image of the wine and bread offered to Abraham from Melchizedek. He tells of the bitterness of the cup and the sweetness of the joy brought on by the grape. He paints a picture of weak individual vines that are capable of producing the most useful fruit.

Perhaps most importantly, Shnorhali praises that divine transformation Christ initiates among His disciples when that simple grape, having be-

come wine, Christ offers as his blood. The offering of grapes, itself a symbol of giving thanks through the donation of first fruits, indeed blesses all vegetation, the land it grows upon, the people that work the fields, and those that consume it as sustenance. This divine blessing bestows life upon God's children and offers a promise of salvation to those who bind themselves to the vine, through obedience to the commandments and bearing good fruit. It is indeed for all these things that we give thanks to God.

EUCHARIST: THANKSGIVING IN THE HOLY BADARAK

We give thanks to you, Lord, who have fed us at your table of immortal life; distributing your Body and your Blood for the salvation of the world and for life to our souls.

Hymn of Thanksgiving
from the *Holy Badarak*

The *Soorp Badarak*, 'Holy Sacrifice,' is the pinnacle of worship. In the *Badarak*, we commune with Christ and our fellow worshippers. The whole experience is mystical, solemn, and holy; but most of all it is a profound expression of love. As communicants, we cannot help but respond to God with an outpouring of gratitude. In fact, other traditions call the Sunday liturgy the 'Eucharist,' which comes from the Greek word for 'thanksgiving.'

The celebrant prays on a number of occasions during the liturgy, "make us worthy to give

you thanks,” and by the end of the liturgy the priest himself offers thanks on behalf of the entire congregation. At the end of the last Gospel, the priest yet again asks God to “make us worthy to give thanks.” The ubiquity of this phrase, “make us worthy to give you thanks,” reminds us that living a life of thanksgiving is itself a gift from the Holy Spirit and a grace that God has bestowed on His creatures. Moreover, it is something that we need to be frequently reminded of; for as human beings we are so prone to dissatisfaction.

Below are some highlights of the various things we offer thanksgiving for during the liturgy:

1. *Being agents and participants of the Holy Sacrifice*

“[That God} made us ministers of this awesome and ineffable mystery”

2. *Holiness of life through the body and blood of Christ*

“For this holy and immortal sacrifice which is on this holy altar, that you will grant it to be to us for holiness of life.”

“Life is granted through Christ’s life-giving Body and Blood”

“Tasting of the Lord’s goodness for holiness of life”

3. *The privilege of being able to use the endearing title “Father” when praying to God*

“God of truth and Father of mercy, we thank you, who have exalted our nature, condemned as we were, above

that of the blessed patriarchs; for you were called God to them, whereas in compassion you have been pleased to be named Father to us.”

4. *Communion itself; including:*

- a. Making us worthy to partake of Holy Communion (p. 46)
- b. The mystery of the undefiled Body and precious Blood of Christ (p. 46)
- c. Receiving in faith of the divine, holy, heavenly, immortal, pure and incorruptible mystery (p. 51)
- d. Distributing Christ's Body and Blood for the salvation of the world and for life to our souls. (p. 51)

5. *God Continually feeding His People*

“Continually feed us, send down upon us your spiritual blessing”

6. *The Church & Renewal of the Church; the community of believers*

“A haven, a temple of holiness, where the name of the Holy Trinity is glorified.”

The church is renewed weekly as we come together in worship.

7. *Everything!*

“In all things blessed are you, O Lord.
We bless you, we praise you;
We give thanks to you;
We pray to you, O Lord our God.”

The Eucharist is indeed an opportunity for all believers, all around the world, to unite with a single faith and express our gratitude for all that God provides to His people.

THANKSGIVING IN THE LITURGICAL LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Thanksgiving occupies a central role in the daily prayer services known as the 'Liturgy of the Hours' or 'Singing of the Hours' (*Zhamerkootyoonk*). Examples from the various services include:

Sunrise Hour

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his
name.

Psalm 100:4

Evening Service

Bowing down to thee, O Lord our God, we
give thanks to thee, for Thou hast granted
us to pass the length of this day in peace.

Peace Service

Giver of Good Gifts and Fountain of Peace,
O Lord our God, make peaceful our minds

and thoughts by driving from us all troubles caused by Satan this night and at all times; so that, being guided by you in this life that passes, we may reach your eternal, heavenly kingdom that you have prepared for your saints from the beginning of the world. And with them, thanking you, we glorify the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; now, and always, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Priest's Prayer

I will go in before the altar of God; to God who makes my youth joyful. I will give thanks to you with praises, O God my God. then why are you grieved, O my soul, and why do you trouble me? Hope in God, give thanks to him; the deliverer of my countenance is God.

Psalm 43 (also used in
the Divine Liturgy)

These examples underscore the sustaining force that God is in our lives, the protection God provides, and the hope we have in the salvation He offers. In a profound expression of unity, the priest's prayer of the Peace Hour also makes our gratitude part of the on-going prayers of all the faithful for all time, uniting us with those who have fallen asleep in Christ and giving us an opportunity to join their voices of gratitude as well. This type of unity is reminiscent of "Soorp Soorp" when the congregation boldly "shouts with the angels" and says: "Holy, holy, holy Lord of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Blessing in the highest. Blessed

are you who did come and are to come in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

MAKING THANKSGIVING A CONSTANT PRACTICE

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

By living a life of thanksgiving, we express our belief that God is our creator, provider, sustainer, and savior, and respond to His glory in a meaningful and heartfelt way. Our response to God is an essential part of our relationship with Him, for there is no relationship that goes only one way.

To God, let us give thanks continually. For it is too monstrous, enjoying as we do His bounty in deed every day, not so much as in word to acknowledge the favor, and this, though the acknowledgment again yields all its profit to us. Since He needs not, be sure, anything of ours: but we stand in need of all things from Him. Therefore, thanksgiving itself adds nothing to Him but causes us to be nearer to Him. For if men’s bounties, when we call them to memory, do more to warm us with their proper love-charm, much more, when we are continually bringing to mind the noble

acts of our Lord towards us, shall we be more diligent in regard to His commandments.

St. John Chrysostom

But how can we truly be thankful in all circumstances, isn't life difficult and full of suffering? St Basil the Great offers hopeful words in the face of this sentiment.

Have you been dishonored? Then have regard for the glory which is laid up in Heaven through patient endurance. Have you suffered a loss? Then contemplate the heavenly wealth and treasure which you have laid up for yourself through your good deeds. Have you been expelled from your homeland? Then you have Jerusalem as your heavenly homeland. Have you lost a child? Then you have Angels, with whom you will dance around the Throne of God, rejoicing eternally. By thus opposing anticipated good things to present sorrows, you will keep your soul in the cheerfulness and tranquility to which the Apostles precept summons us.

St. Basil's Homily on Being Thankful

As difficult as it may be to be hopeful in trying times, for the Christian that confesses God as "sustainer" and "protector" there ought to be no doubt that God's mighty right hand is close by and that His promise of eternal life cannot be shaken.

AN UNAPPEALING ALTERNATIVE

Our weekly “form” confession during Holy *Badarak* is based on a 4th century text attributed to St. Ephrem the Syrian. In the full version, entitled *Contrition*, he enumerates a number of sins, including: cynicism, grumbling, discontent, stinginess, mistrust, and despair. Gratitude is the antithesis and the antidote to these sins. Glorifying God with thanksgiving dispels the temptation that leads us to the shortcomings St. Ephrem warns us against. The Christian heart acknowledges that the source of life and hope is God; and naturally expresses this reality confidently in expressions of thanksgiving. Doing so leaves no room for grumbling and despair, for God is with us.

GOD KNOWS. GOD CARES.

God is well aware of the needs of humanity, and He cares diligently for all of His children. The greatest gift, and the one we ought to be most thankful for, is the privilege of living a life close to God, in this world, and in the one to come, through salvation in Jesus Christ. Recall the reactions we mentioned above to free gifts - disbelief, confusion, and suspicion. As we grow as Christians we can confidently respond to God with faith, clarity, and trust – expressing our thanks for all things.

NOTES

NOTES

REFERENCES

Cover Image: Last Supper, from Manuscript 313, end of the 14th century, Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), Matenadaran: Anonymous Armenian artist, the 14th century



ԱՌԱՋՆՈՐԴՈՒԹԻՒՆ ՅԱՅՈՑ ԱՄԵՐԻԿԱՅԻ ԱՐԵՒԵԼԵԱՆ ԹԵՄԻ
DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA (EASTERN)

630 Second Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.armenianchurch.us

www.vemkar.us