

Christian Gratitude

A Fundamental Hallmark of Orthodox Spirituality

by Archimandrite Cyprian

The text of this article, translated from the Greek, is taken from an address by Father Cyprian, a brother of the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili, Greece, and Secretary of the Holy Synod in Resistance. It was delivered on October 4, 1999 (Old Style), at the convocation held annually at the Novotel Convention Center, in downtown Athens, to honor the Name Day of Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili.

*Our Much-Revered Metropolitan and
Spiritual Father, Beloved of Christ:*

My heart is inundated with sincere joy at this moment, because, by the Grace of Christ our Savior, I am fulfilling an obedience which, although very difficult, is at the same time very gratifying. The great difficulty in question concerns my many inadequacies, of which you have assuredly always been well aware; and I ask your forgiveness for these. However, the great delight involved derives from the fact that this evening, at our annual “Εὐχαριστήρια” [“Thanksgiving”],¹ we are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of your Episcopacy.

This anniversary is very important for our monastic Brotherhood, for your wider flock, and for our Church; it is an anniversary which prompts us to undertake an historical retrospective of two decades filled with accomplishments for the glory of God. Such an anniversary is, naturally, a source of special joy and gladness for your spiritual children.

Now, every happy anniversary is directly bound up with gratitude; that is, it reminds us of, and underscores, our debt of gratitude and thanksgiving both to our Lord and to the people whom His philanthropic right hand has used as instruments for His glory, for our sanctification, and, in general, for the progress of His salvific work.

¹ Since 1976, the Brotherhood of the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Fili, Attica, has held an annual “Thanksgiving,” that is, a special convocation, on the occasion of the Name Day of its spiritual Father and Abbot.

I hope, therefore, our Most Reverend Metropolitan, that you will allow me, rather than mentioning those historic stages in your twenty years as a Hierarch that portray your contribution to the Church, to focus my attention, instead, on the topic of gratitude.

Let me take this opportunity to proclaim “with a loud voice,” from this podium, that we are most deeply grateful to you, since, among many other things, you have taught us, and continue to teach us, in word and deed, that very gratitude which is the predominant component of your personality. Hence, let my address this evening, which centers on gratitude, be viewed as a spiritual repayment to Your Eminence for your untiring toils, during twenty continuous years, for our edification and consolation. I invoke the protection and strengthening of our Lady *Theotokos* and our Holy Patrons, Saints Cyprian and Justina, that, by your prayers, I might expound on this subject.

I shall, at the onset of my address, pose a crucial question: Is gratitude really a matter of concern in our crisis-ridden era? Unfortunately, this question is raised not only by worldly people, but also by pious Christians, who not only do not practice gratitude in their lives, but who neither reflect on it nor perceive its absence as a serious deficit. This constitutes, in the fullest sense of the term, a very grave *sin*. How, indeed, is it possible for Christians, who are deemed worthy of the greatest gift—that is, of being members of the Body of Christ—, to be unaware that gratitude is the fundamental hallmark of Orthodox spirituality and an indispensable element of our Christian identity?

We observe with profound distress that this ignorance concerning gratitude constitutes yet another proof of the corruption which the Orthodox ecclesiastical ethos has undergone, owing to the influence of a worldly mentality. Such a mentality leads man, a rational creature fashioned according to the image of God, into behavior that is more irrational than that of irrational animals. Is this characterization perhaps exaggerated? I shall let a Patristic text provide us with the answer. This text relates a very charming, moving, and instructive event, which speaks for itself and introduces us to the important issue of gratitude.

A hyena, having a blind whelp, took it in her mouth and delivered it to St. Makarios of Alexandria. She pushed open the hatch of his dwelling with her head, went inside, and threw her whelp at his feet. St. Makarios picked it up and ascertained that it was blind. He spat on its eyes and prayed; the whelp then immediately opened its eyes. After suckling it, its mother took it and departed.

On the following day, the hyena brought St. Makarios the hide of a large sheep. The Saint looked at it and said to her: ‘Where did you find this? You must have eaten a sheep. And so, since it is the result of an injustice, I will not

accept it from you.’ The hyena then bowed her head, knelt, and left the hide at the Saint’s feet.

The Saint said to her: ‘I tell you, I will not accept it, unless you swear to me that you will never again cause distress to poor folk by eating their sheep.’ At this, she nodded her head, as if to agree with St. Makarios. The Saint then accepted the hide which the hyena had [in gratitude—*Trans.*] brought him.²

Let us now attempt to approach, as succinctly as possible, the theological foundations of gratitude as an indispensable hallmark of human nature. Orthodox Tradition teaches us that man is a “eucharistic being,” that is, a rational creature who exists in an unceasing communion of love (ἀγάπη) with his Creator and is oriented towards Him with an insatiable disposition of gratitude, thanksgiving, and doxology. Man has this innate capacity for love and thanksgiving because he is fashioned “according to the image and likeness” of God;³ it is precisely for this reason that he bears the seal of gratitude indelibly within himself. God freely created man out of His exceeding goodness, in order that man might participate in Divine Goodness; and the Lord created *beneficently* so that His creatures, the recipients of this beneficence, might *gratefully* commune with Him, offer thanksgiving and glory to Him, and thus become partakers of Divine glory. “The desire to glorify God,” says St. Basil the Great, “is by nature implanted in all rational creatures.”⁴ St. John of Damascus, in a summary of Patristic teaching on this subject, makes these telling remarks:

Since, therefore, God, Who is good, and preëminently good, was not satisfied with contemplation of Himself, but in His exceeding goodness willed that certain things should come into existence which would enjoy His benefits and participate in His goodness, He brought all things, both invisible and visible, out of

² Palladios, *Lausaic History*, in *Χαρίσματα καὶ Χαρισματοῦχοι* [*Spiritual Gifts and Persons Endowed with Spiritual Gifts*], 8th ed. (Oropos: Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, 1995), Vol. 1, p. 241 (cf. *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xxxiv, col. 1060CD). The aforementioned volume contains a similar and equally moving story about Abba John the Sabbaïte and a wild boar: “On one occasion, a female boar came to Abba John the Sabbaïte, carrying a whelp in her mouth; when she drew near to the Elder, she left the youngling at his feet. On seeing that it was blind, he spat in the dust, made some clay, and anointed the eyes of the little animal. The whelp at once regained its sight. Its mother then went up to it, took it, and departed, rejoicing. On the following day, she came again, dragging an enormous cabbage with great effort. The Saint looked at it, smiled, and said: ‘Whence did you bring this? You must have stolen it from the gardens of the ascetics. But I do not accept stolen goods. Go, therefore, and leave it where you found it.’ The animal, in embarrassment, took it and left” (*ibid.*, pp. 252-253). This story is taken from the critical edition by F. Nau (*Oriens Christianus*, Vol. II [1902]).

³ Genesis 1:26-27.

⁴ Homily 15, “On Faith,” §1, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xxxi, col. 464B.

non-being into being and created them—including man, who is a compound of the visible and the invisible.⁵

In connection with this, it should be firmly emphasized that we become fully aware of this loving, grateful, and eucharistic nature of man in the sacred Mystery of Divine Communion. What takes place here? In this Divine Mystagogy, we have a foretaste of the eschatological glory of Deified human nature in the sanctified atmosphere of thanksgiving and doxology to God; in the Liturgy, there is revealed to us the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven—that is, the communion of God with His rational creatures in the glorified Body and Blood of the God-Man, Christ the Savior—and we experience this fulfillment in our lives.

Man's gratitude to his Creator reaches its highest point in this supernatural Mystery, because his fallen nature receives the most sublime gift of re-creation, renewal, and Deification in Christ, as St. Symeon the New Theologian writes with profound lyricism:

Therefore, in partaking of Thy Flesh, I partake of Thy Nature, and I truly participate in Thine Essence, becoming a communicant and also an heir of Thy Divinity in the body, greater than the Bodiless Powers, I reckon, and I become a son of God, as Thou didst say, not to the Angels, but to us, thus calling us gods: 'I said: Ye are gods, and all of you the sons of the Most High.'⁶

Therefore, the supernatural and all-holy Mystery of Divine Communion is, in truth, the Mystery of Gratitude. "For this reason," as St. John Chrysostomos marvelously puts it,

the dread Mysteries, full of such great salvation, which are celebrated at every Liturgy, are also called a Thanksgiving [Εὐχαριστία] because they are the re-

⁵ *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II, ch. 2, "On Creation;" *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XCIV, cols. 864C-865A.

St. Gregory the Theologian makes the following beautiful remarks concerning creation on the basis of Divine goodness: "Therefore, since this movement of Self-contemplation alone could not satisfy Goodness, but Good must be poured out and go forth beyond Itself, so as to multiply the objects of Its beneficence—for this is the nature of the supreme Goodness—, He first conceived the Angelic and Heavenly Powers; and this conception was a work fulfilled by His Word and perfected by His Spirit. . . . [And wishing to produce] a single living being out of both (the invisible and the visible creation, I mean) He fashioned man. . . . in one person combining spirit and flesh: spirit because of the Grace bestowed upon him, flesh on account of the height to which he had been exalted; the one, that he might continue to live and glorify his Benefactor, the other, that he might suffer, and by suffering be put in remembrance and be corrected if he became proud in his greatness" (Homily 45, "On Pascha," §§5-7, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXVI, cols. 629A-632C; cf. Homily 38, "On Theophany," §9, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXVI, col. 320C).

⁶ "Hymn 7;" vv. 30-36, in *Ἔργα [Works]* (Thessaloniki: "Orthodoxos Kypsele" Publications, 1990), Vol. III, p. 60.

membrance of many benefits, and they signify the culmination of God’s Providence towards us, and in every way cause us to be thankful to Him.⁷

From this perspective, that is, of man’s nature as a eucharistic being, we can now understand very clearly the persistence of the Holy Fathers in exhorting us to be unceasing practitioners of gratitude. “This is the will of God,” St. John Chrysostomos pithily assures us, “that we always give thanks; this is the mark of a virtuous soul.”⁸ And to the question of why “this is the will of God,” the same Saint responds simply and precisely: “God accepts nothing so much as a grateful and thankful soul.”⁹ In another place, he reiterates: “Nothing so gladdens God as when one is thankful.”¹⁰

However, it would be very useful for us to mention also the immediate practical results of blessed gratitude, in order to dispel—apart from anything else—the mistaken idea of some, that gratitude pertains only to the contemplative life and eschatological recompense. In the first place, we should not forget the following important truth: in order to preserve a benefaction in the best way possible, we should always remember it and constantly thank God for it. “For the best preservative of any benefaction,” say the Saints, “is the remembrance of that benefaction, and a continual thanksgiving.”¹¹

Next, the immediate result of continual thanksgiving is the following: when our Lord ascertains that we respond with gratitude to His gifts, He gives us richer gifts and never ceases from doing good to us: “For such is our Master,” affirm the Saints, “that, whenever He sees that we are grateful for what has already come our way, He bestows lavish gifts on us and never desists from doing good to us, rewarding the gratitude of those who show obedience.”¹² In emphasizing this idea, Abba Isaac the Syrian adds that, when he who is benefitted thanks God, it is as if he provokes His Goodness to give greater gifts than the previous ones: “Gratitude on the part of one who receives provokes the Giver [God] to give greater gifts than before.”¹³

We should also keep in mind that constant remembrance of God’s gifts ultimately proves to be our best instructor in the virtuous life, since it unceasingly prompts us to strive gratefully to reciprocate God’s love: “Remembrance of benefactions [and gratitude for them] will be a suitable instructor for us in the virtuous way of life.”¹⁴

⁷ Homily 25 on St. Matthew, §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LVII, col. 331.

⁸ *Idem*, Homily 10 on 1 Thessalonians, §2, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXII, col. 457.

⁹ *Idem*, Homily 52 on Genesis, §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LIV, col. 460.

¹⁰ *Idem*, Homily 19 on Ephesians, §2, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXII, col. 129.

¹¹ *Idem*, Homily 25 on St. Matthew, §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LVII, col. 331.

¹² *Idem*, Homily 41 on Genesis, §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LIII, col. 378.

¹³ Homily 30, “On Giving Thanks to God,” in *Ἄπαντα τὰ ἐνδοθέντα Ἀσκητιζιά* [*The Complete Extant Ascetical Works*], reprinted by C. Spanou (Athens: n.d.), p. 126.

¹⁴ St. John Chrysostomos, Homily 26 on Genesis, §5, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LIII, col. 238.

I shall conclude this section on the immediate practical benefits of Grace-filled gratitude by extolling, in particular, its value for us as an invincible weapon whereby we can repel all the devices of the demons: “There is nothing so good as thanksgiving. . . . We have one weapon which is the best, and sufficient to repel all such devices as these: in everything to give thanks to God.”¹⁵

* * *

With the hope that I am not tiring you, I would like to forestall a misunderstanding: as we proceed and delve into this astonishing principle of Orthodox spirituality, perhaps you are thinking that gratitude, on the basis of all that we have expounded hitherto, is a simple and easy matter. Let us dispel this misunderstanding. When the Saints exhort us to thank our Lord “not only in words, but also with deeds and actions,”¹⁶ they present us with a vast arena in which to practice gratitude; that is, we must give thanks unceasingly and for all things: for our illnesses, for poverty, for pleasant and unpleasant things, for visible and invisible things, “for all the things we know and do not know, for the seen and unseen benefits that come to us,”¹⁷ “giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

The Divine Chrysostomos asks: “What then? Are we to show gratitude for all that happens to us?” And he immediately replies:

Yes. Even if it be disease or poverty. . . , for seen and unseen benefits. . . , and for those which we receive against our will; . . .but also whenever we are either in poverty, or in sicknesses, or are being insulted, then let us intensify our thanksgiving; thanksgiving, I mean, not in words, nor with the tongue, but in deeds and works, in mind and in heart; let us give thanks to Him with all our souls.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Idem*, Homily 1, “On the Statues,” § 11, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIX, col. 41.

¹⁶ *Idem*, Homily 18 on Romans, § 5, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LX, col. 579.

¹⁷ *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostomos*, prayer of the *Anaphora*.

¹⁸ Ephesians 5:20.

¹⁹ St. John Chrysostomos, Homily 19 on Ephesians, § 2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, cols. 129-130.

• St. John’s idea that we should thank God, among many other things, “both for the Kingdom and for Hell,” “for Hell, for punishment, for the Kingdom of Heaven” (Homily 10 on Colossians, §§ 2-3, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 368) is truly very profound and astonishing.

• Interpreting his thoughts, the Saint says: “What is required is for a man to give thanks when he is in afflictions and discouragements. . . . And why do I speak of the afflictions of this world? We ought to give thanks to God, even for Hell itself, for the torments and punishments of the next world. For, it is very beneficial for those of us who are attentive, when the fear of Hell is laid like a bridle on our hearts. . . . For what else is the peculiar work of God if not this, that He benefits the human race through chastisements and refreshments alike?” (Homily 19 on Ephesians, § 2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 130).

The height of holiness to which thanksgiving exalts us, especially in unpleasant occurrences, is so great that the Saints consider those who show gratitude to be equal to the Holy Martyrs:

Have you fallen seriously ill? [asks St. John Chrysostomos]. This brings you the crown of martyrdom [through thanksgiving].²⁰ Nothing is holier than that tongue which gives thanks to God in evil circumstances; truly in no respect does it fall short of that of Martyrs; both alike are crowned, both the former and the latter.²¹

While we are on this subject, we should not forget that St. John Chrysostomos himself, whose end was truly martyric, did not cease, until his dying breath, to exclaim those famous words: “‘Glory to God for all things’; I will not cease from saying this always, in all that happens to me: ‘Glory to God for all things!’”²²

Now, I hasten once again to anticipate the objections of some, that these demands of gratitude are excessive and unattainable, given the realities of life today; and so, before I attempt my final ascent to the highest peaks of blessed gratitude and thanksgiving, it would be good for us to receive some encouragement and fortification. In response to these objections, therefore, I will not bring to mind things that took place in times of old, such as the astonishing gratitude shown by a lion towards St. Gerasimos of the Jordan,²³ lest I make my speech too lengthy, but rather a very moving and instructive event from our own day and age.

The Athonite Elder Philaret, who was Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Kostamonitou and who reposed in 1963, had the particular spiritual gift (χάρισμα) of love. His love was not restricted only to human beings, but extended further, to inanimate objects, animals, and nature. We perceive this empathy for irrational nature as a typical feature of the Grace-filled lives of God’s chosen servants.

One day, there was great commotion outside the Elder’s cell: two swallows had started a fierce fight with each other! The Elder was troubled. He went outside and beheld a distressing spectacle: the stronger swallow was attacking the other with its beak and literally plucking out its feathers. Without wasting any

²⁰ *Idem*, Homily 3 on 1 Thessalonians, §5, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 412.

• The Saint is here referring primarily to the case in which a sick person does not yield to the pressures of others to have recourse to sorcerers for a cure, but “gives thanks to God”: then “you have dealt him [the Devil] a mortal blow” (*ibid.*, §6, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 414).

²¹ *Idem*, Homily 8 on Colossians, §5, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 357.

²² *Idem*, Epistle 12, “To Olympias the Deaconess,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LII, col. 610.

²³ For this amazing story, see John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*, ch. 107, trans. John Wortley (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), pp. 86-88 (*cf. Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXVII.3, cols. 2965C-2969B).

time, he chased the stronger swallow away. He lovingly took the injured bird in his hands and rescued it; as a result of his nursing, it survived.

Thereafter, just as the lion of St. Gerasimos used to follow the Saint everywhere, showing its gratitude and dedication, so also did this swallow: it flew in front of the Elder, fluttered its wings, frolicked, and sang.

One day, the Elder went outside, either to marvel at God ‘in His works’ or to pray in silence. The swallow, his faithful friend and companion, was happily flying beside him.

The Elder sat down in the fruit-drying room a short distance from the monastery, and fell asleep without realizing it; but the swallow suddenly began to flutter rapidly above his head, chirping loudly, as if it wanted to wake him up and warn him of some danger.

And in very truth, when the Elder awoke, what did he see? A large reptile not too far away from him. His companion had in turn performed its own act of charity for the merciful Elder.²⁴

However, I must now round off the benefits of gratitude with their crowning point: love for God and love for one’s neighbor. The Saints teach—and our own experience confirms it—that gratitude brings us closer to God, and thereby our love for the Lord becomes exceedingly fervent.

Let us give thanks to God continually. For, it is outrageous that when we enjoy His benefaction to us in deed every single day, we do not acknowledge the favor with so much as a word; and this, when the acknowledgment confers great benefit on us. He does not need anything of ours, but we stand in need of all things from Him.

In point of fact, thanksgiving adds nothing to Him, but it brings us closer to Him. For if, when we recall the benefactions of men, we are the more warmed by affection for them; much more, when we continually bring to mind the benefits of the Master towards us, shall we be more earnest with regard to His commandments.

For this cause Paul also said, ‘Be ye thankful.’²⁵ For the best preservative of any benefaction is the remembrance of the benefaction, and a continual thanksgiving for it.²⁶

At the same time that love for God in our hearts increases through gratitude, love for our neighbor also increases. Experience has shown that thanksgiving is a very effective method for curing whatever weaknesses we might have when it comes to fellowship with our neighbor.

²⁴ Archimandrite Ioannikios, “Philaret of Kostamonitou,” in *Σύγχρονοι Άγιορειτικοί Μορφές—9* [*Contemporary Athonite Personalities: Vol. IX*] (Oropos: Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, 1983), pp. 80-81.

²⁵ Colossians 3:15.

²⁶ St. John Chrysostomos, Homily 25 on St. Matthew, §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LVII, col.

It is striking how the Saints insist that we give thanks to our Lord, not only for the personal benefits that we receive, but also for “common” benefits and those granted to other people; such a thankful attitude on our part turns us from men into Angels: “Let us be thankful,” St. John Chrysostomos urges us, “also for the blessings of others; this makes us Angels instead of men; let us give thanks continually.”²⁷ Indeed, it is worth our while to observe how this wondrous subject of love is analyzed by the Saints, who connect it with the sublime Mystery of the Divine Eucharist:

Let us therefore give thanks to Him continually, and let this precede both our words and our works. But let us be thankful not for our own blessings alone, but also for those of others; for in this way we shall be able both to destroy our envy and to reinforce our love and make it more genuine. For you will no longer be able to envy those on whose behalf you give thanks to the Master.

Wherefore, as you know, when this Sacrifice [of the Eucharist] is being offered, the Priest also enjoins us to give thanks for the whole world, for things past, for the things present, for what has previously happened to us, and for what will befall us hereafter.

For, this is what frees us from earth and translates us to Heaven, and makes us Angels instead of men. . . . We have been taught to treat our fellow-servants in such a way as to consider even their blessings ours. Hence, throughout his Epistles, St. Paul gives thanks for God’s benefactions to the world.

Let us, too, therefore continually give thanks, for our own blessings, and for those of others, alike for the small and for the great.²⁸

Perhaps this is the most appropriate moment for me to mention something which I hope will contribute positively to your understanding of these thoughts concerning the two aspects of love expressed by means of gratitude. Some time ago, a certain monk confided to me a very beneficial experience of his, in order to edify me and fortify me spiritually; I will summa-

²⁷ *Idem*, Homily 25 on St. Matthew, §§3-4, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LVII, col. 331.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

• We continually encounter in St. John’s sacred writings this profound and moving exhortation: “Let us be thankful also for the blessings of others.”

For example:

- “Nothing profits us so much as constantly to remember the benefactions of God, both public and private” (Homily 1 on St. Titus, §1, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 665).
- “Let us give thanks to Him for all things, public and private, for His goodness” (Exposition of Psalm 135, §3, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LV, col. 404).
- “Let this, he says, be your work, to give thanks in your prayers both for the seen and the unseen. . . . Thus is it customary for the Saints to pray, and to give thanks for the common benefits of all” (Homily 10 on Colossians, §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 368).
- “We must give thanks to God also for the goods that befall others. . . . Do you see how he unites and binds us together, not only through prayer, but also through thanksgiving? For he who is urged to thank God for his neighbor’s good is also bound to love him and be kindly disposed towards him” (Homily 6 on 1 St. Timothy, §1, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 531).

rize his main points, and I especially ask our beloved brethren in Christ to pay attention to these:

As you know, brother, I am weak and have made no spiritual progress.... Despite my efforts, I have never succeeded in offering anything to our Lord.... I do not know how it happened, but I once began to invoke the prayers of my Elder and the help of the *Panagia*, and to ponder on the love and bounties of our Lord to me in my wretchedness.... Since then, I have not ceased to cultivate this inward activity.... My heart gradually began to soften and feel compunction.... A fire was kindled inside me and it blazes unceasingly.... And it dominates me more and more.... I cannot get my fill of love for Christ...or of love for my fellow-men and for the whole of creation.... Whenever I give thanks, this flame flares up. I continually entreat Christ, saying:

‘O my Christ, do not deprive me of Heavenly blessings for the sake of being satiated by earthly ones.... Deem me worthy to be in the celestial Paradise with the Heavenly Angels and to enjoy the good things of Heaven, just as I am in this earthly Paradise with the earthly Angels, my brothers, and enjoy the good things of this earth in such abundance.’²⁹

In referring to this truly wondrous experience and to the most sublime benefits which flow from gratitude, that is, the benefits of love for our Lord and for our brother, we have thus, now, attained to the highest pinnacle: “Love is the fulfillment of the Law,”³⁰ the “recapitulation”³¹ of all the commandments, and the “bond of perfection.”³²

Consequently, someone with great interest in this subject will rightly pose the crucial question: “Well then, how are we to become grateful, given that our hearts are hard and proud? Is there any method that we can follow?” This very serious question has, of course, been answered in all that I have hitherto expounded; however, I think it expedient for us to invite our Holy Fathers to enlighten us yet again, and in this way to conclude our stroll in this beautiful garden. St. John Chrysostomos asserts clearly: “Let us become grateful by continually turning over in our minds the bounteous gifts

²⁹ The confession of a monk known to us.

³⁰ Romans 13:10.

³¹ Cf. Romans 13:9.

• “What is said through the many commandments is included, like a recapitulation—that is, a concise summary—, in loving one’s neighbor” (Evthymios Zigabenos, Vol. I, p. 154).

³² Colossians 3:14.

• “He did not say that it is ‘the summit,’ but what is greater, ‘the bond’; this is more necessary than the other. For ‘summit’ indeed is an intensity of perfection, but ‘bond’ is the holding fast together of those things which produce perfection; it is, as it were, the root” (St. John Chrysostomos, Homily 8 on Colossians, §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 354).

of God and remembering the magnitude and multitude of His benefactions.”³³
And he continues:

For if we constantly call to mind the benefits which God has bestowed upon our nature, we shall be grateful, and this will become for us the greatest incitement to embark on the path of virtue. For, it is evident that he who remembers the benefits of God will be zealous not to prove unworthy thereof, but to display such eagerness and gratitude that he will be vouchsafed other benefits as well. For, our Master is generous, and when He sees that we are grateful for what He has already given us, He lavishes Grace upon us and grants us yet greater gifts.³⁴

But an additional question arises: What exactly does it mean for us to be in constant remembrance of God’s bounties? To this equally serious question, the Saints reply by listing examples of God’s benefactions,³⁵ in an attempt to arouse in us the feeling of gratitude to the Lord. For example, St. Basil the Great, with reference to the verse in which the Holy Prophet David asks, “What shall I render unto the Lord for all that He hath rendered unto me?,”³⁶ majestically enumerates gifts which we, being more irrational than the irrational animals, habitually forget.

He brought us from non-being in being; He dignified us with reason; He provided us with crafts to help sustain our lives; He causes food to spring up from the earth; He has given us cattle to serve us. For our sake there is rain, for our sake there is the sun; the hills and plains have been adorned for our benefit, affording us refuge from the peaks of the mountains. For our sake rivers flow; for our sake fountains gush forth; the sea is made calm for our trading; riches come from mines and delights from everywhere, and the whole of creation is offered as a gift to us, on account of the rich and abundant Grace of our Benefactor towards us.

But why speak of minor gifts? For our sake God lived among men; for the sake of our corrupt flesh, ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’^{36a} To the thankless He was their Benefactor; to those sitting in darkness, the Sun of Righteousness; upon the Cross He was the Impassible One; in death, the Life;

³³ St. John Chrysostomos, Catechesis 5, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, Vol. xxx, p. 442.

³⁴ *Idem*, Homily 15 on Genesis, §5, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LIII, col. 124.

³⁵ St. John Chrysostomos, for example, offers the following list of God’s benefactions to mankind:

“Who could reckon what God has already done for us, what He has promised, and what He does each day? He brought us from non-being into being, bestowed upon us both body and soul, made us rational creatures, gave us the air to breathe, brought forth the entire creation for the sake of mankind, and willed that man should enjoy a state of Paradise from the very beginning and have a life free from any pain or toil, and that he be not one whit inferior to the Angels and the Bodiless Powers, and, though in the body, not subject to bodily needs” (Homily 27 on Genesis, §1, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LIII, col. 239).

³⁶ Psalm 115:3, *Septuaginta*.

^{36a} St. John 1:14.

in Hades, the Light; the Resurrection for the fallen;^{36b} the spirit of adoption into sonship, bestowals of spiritual gifts, and promises of crowns.

In addition to such great and splendid benefits, or rather, benefits *par excellence*, the benefits that He promises us in the future life are many times greater: the delight of Paradise, glory in the Kingdom of Heaven, honors equal to those of the Angels, and the vision of God, which, for those counted worthy of it, is the highest of all goods; every rational nature desires this, and may we also attain to it, after we have cleansed ourselves of carnal passions.³⁷

Our Most Reverend Metropolitan and Much-Revered Spiritual Father:

The twenty years of your Episcopacy have prompted us to give a lengthy account of blessed gratitude, since it is through your own teaching that we have come to realize its value and importance. In truth, I must repeat with particular emphasis that we are most profoundly grateful to you, since you have taught us gratitude in word and deed. At this point, I would not want to weary you any further by opening yet another chapter, in order to deal specifically with gratitude towards one's spiritual Father; for now, I confine myself to stating concisely the content of such a future chapter: *A grateful attitude towards God and a grateful attitude towards one's spiritual Father are two sides of the same coin—that is, of thrice-blessed gratitude, without which it is impossible for us to pass through the gates of Paradise.*

Finally, let me close my meager address by conveying the grateful thanks of our entire Brotherhood for all that our Savior, in His love for mankind, has bestowed upon us through your prayers, and especially during these two de-

^{36b.} These Patristic phrases are the source for the fourth *Sticheron* at the Praises on Sunday in the Seventh Tone.

• The Prophet David examines “his own poverty, for he has nothing worthy to give in return” for these most sublime and innumerable gifts; St. Basil provides the answer: the way out of this impasse is the “fellowship and affection” which ought to characterize human beings; when we give to the “least” of our Lord’s “brethren,” we are, in essence, giving to the Lord Himself, Who then “recompenses” us, rewarding us munificently, not as a “benefactor,” but as a “beneficiary”!

³⁷ Homily “On the Martyr Julitta (and the Remainder of the Previous Homily on Thanksgiving),” §§6-7, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXI, cols. 253B-256A.

• A fraternal observation. The booklet *Εὐγνωμοσύνη: ἡ χαρὰ τῆς ζωῆς* [*Gratitude: The Joy of Life*] published by Χριστιανική Στέγη in Kalamata (1st ed. 1998), although impressive at first sight, ultimately provokes caution and skepticism in the attentive reader. In essence, it is influenced—albeit unwittingly and with the best of intentions—, by the non-Orthodox ideas and practices of the school of “Positive Thinking” promoted in America, which has become familiar to us in Greece, and especially through the works of Norman Vincent Peale (see Protopresbyter Antonios Alevizopoulos, *Ἀὐτογνωσία—Ἀὐτοπραγμάτωση—Σωτηρία* [*Self-Knowledge, Self-Realization, and Salvation*] [Athens: 1991]).

cares. Our humble, but heartfelt prayer is that our Lord may grant you length of days, so that you might pasture your rational flock for many more years in the verdant meadows of Grace. And may our All-Holy Mother vouchsafe that you always taste the most sweet and exhilarating waters of the thanksgiving and gratitude of those dear to you, so that you might derive courage, hope, and consolation therefrom, to the glory of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!



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