

11-28-19 Thanksgiving Day Liturgy

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy Thanksgiving! It's a good day. We are to be people who are always grateful, always, always, always grateful. But we also give thanks to God when in the liturgical year, as the church supplies, we have days where we are reminded, we're reminded how we are to live all of the time. Or like in the Lenten and Paschal season, we are reminded about the intensity with which we are to be living spiritually all of the time, and the joy that we are to have in Christ's resurrection all of the time.

And it's also, in my opinion, a great blessing when the country, when the civil authorities still gives us an opportunity to celebrate what is really ultimately a religious holiday, becoming rarer and rarer. The theme over time, being persecuted, people who do not want to give thanks. It's like the folks that at Christmas are saying, "Happy holiday." Merry Xmas. I love going into the stores, particularly the hardware store where they know me fairly well and just yelling, "Merry Christmas!" at that time. And people will look, and they'll be surprised, and they always smile though and they go, "Merry Christmas," back. So, it's like a secret. And I say, "I don't care what anybody thinks". We have to be that way. We have to be bold. So many people feel that way, they feel that way, but they don't hear anyone representing them, and it brings joy to their heart, when we have that kind of boldness and comfort with our faith.

And today as Americans, we gather together, and we celebrate Thanksgiving. It's a religious holiday. It's a holiday where we remember that the Puritans arrived in America having fled persecution. And they had a lot of theological problems in their expression of Christianity, but we can honor them that they were willing to leave their homeland and go to a very strange and hostile place, in order to have religious freedom. That's something that we might have to do someday. That is certainly something that Orthodox Christian throughout history, have had to do.

In the early centuries, the Christians dwelt in the catacombs when they worshiped because they were hiding, and they were persecuted. At other times, religions like Islam took over their country and they were literally driven out of their own homes, or when Israel was established. And many of the Orthodox Christians in Jerusalem were driven out of their homes literally. I know families who were on vacation when Israel was established, and when they came home, someone else was living in their house. Their family photos were still on the walls, their belongings were still in the closets and they were not allowed to even go into the home. And so, we honor that sacrifice that the people are willing to make in order to be free in the relationship with God.

In those early days, it's important to know that after the original Thanksgiving feast where the people had, the year before, many, many family members had died, had starved to death. They did not successfully bring in a harvest in this new land that

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they didn't understand how to farm yet. And when the following year the harvest was great, some of the crops still failed, but there was enough that they knew they were going to make it through the winter.

And they decided to set aside a special day to celebrate the grace of God. And they brought, they went out, the reason we eat turkeys is because they went out bird hunting, and they brought back enough birds, by the grace of God, they saw it as a miracle to feed the whole colony for about a week. That's a lot of birds. And then the Indians that they got along with at the time, brought a good number of deer and they feasted, because they realized that they were not going to die. And they were thankful to God. They were thankful to God, who they believed had provided for them. And that's an example that we want to follow.

In the years after that, it's important to know that Thanksgiving was a fast day. Isn't that Orthodox, very Orthodox. God had given them a feast and preserved their life, and so they dedicated that day originally as a fast day. So that by fasting on the Thanksgiving Day, they would remember the hunger that God had rescued them from. Very appropriate, very spiritually insightful. And we are a people who as Orthodox Christians, we want our life to be full of gratitude, not a shallow, artificial cheesy gratitude where we just praise Jesus for everything that comes along, but one that is deep and one that is truly heartfelt. And that gratitude comes naturally to us, Saints teach us, naturally comes to us when somebody does a favor for us.

When somebody lets us off from being in trouble, when we really deserve to be in trouble, we're naturally grateful. When somebody does a favor for us, we are naturally grateful, when there was a job that we had to do, and somebody else does it for us, we're very grateful. And that natural gratitude spiritually has to become something that accompanies our appreciation for God's love for us. When we start realizing that every day and every moment everything is being done for us all of the time. Did not God do us a favor by bringing us into existence, by creating the world for us.

Saint Gregory, the Theologian would tell people, he would say to them, we hear often this saying like, "Jesus died for you." If you're the only person on the face of the earth, He still would've come and been crucified and resurrected for you personally. And Saint Gregory the Theologian would add to that, that all of creation, the heavens, the stars, the planets, all of the plants and animals, the ocean and the land was made for you. God created it for you. Shouldn't we be grateful? That's how much He loves us. And we start realizing that all of life is a favor. All of life is God doing for us what is impossible for us to do alone. And in our sobriety, and as that gratitude and that love for God grows, we start really realizing and accepting that even the hard things that come along are a favor for us.

Remember, when our kids were all little or if you still have little kids now, how

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often are you doing things that they don't like? And you're doing it for their wellbeing. That's loving discipline. Scripture tells us God's chastens the one He loves, He purifies them. Saint Anthony the Great would teach that, that when we don't have gratitude, God allows suffering so that we would become grateful for how great it was before this suffering started. And then we'd learned to be grateful. And that the more grateful we are, the more God pours out His bounties on us because we are glorifying Him being the source of everything good in our life. So we want to take that natural gratitude that we have when somebody does us a favor and realize God is doing us a favor all of the time. In fact, everything, everything in our life, from our own existence, to every joy, to every struggle is a favor from Him, and we are grateful. We are grateful to Him.

There's a very appropriate quote from Saint Anthony the Great also, Saint Anthony says, and this is a very appropriate Thanksgiving Day, that it's not a sin to eat. It's not a sin to eat, but it is a sin to eat without gratitude. What a wonderful quote for Thanksgiving. It is not a sin to eat, but it is a sin to eat without gratitude.

We also celebrate today, which is wonderful. The synopsis of the Holy Archangels, Michael and Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael. And as an example, to us, all the angels not grateful before God always unceasingly? Did they not see things that we have not seen? Do they not know things that we don't know? Did they not see Satan, and a third of the angels fall from heaven, fall from grace and realize that they had by the mercy of God's love, then preserved from that fall?

They are around His throne always, not doing what he asked them to do because they are afraid of Him because he is the Supreme authority and you have to obey Him or bad things will happen, but obeying Him because they are so full of awareness and gratitude that everything He does is good. And it's a joy to them, and they are thankful that they get to participate in His works, particularly for mankind, being with us, seeing everything that we do, guarding us, trying to help us when we allow them.

So on this day, take this national holiday and make it something deeper in your heart. It's one day a year that the whole country feels obliged a little bit to be thankful. Families around the country still gather together today to fellowship together, maybe a strange family that this is the only time of the year that they ever really get together. And they know that there's an obligation when they gather to be thankful, because this holiday has preserved that theme. But as Orthodox Christians, we are not going to just let this day pass, be thankful for one 24-hour period and then get on with being bitter. We want to take what is being taught today, and apply it to everyday, to apply to all of our life, to every relationship and every situation that we have.

And as I said to you last night, Saint Anthony the Great also says that the all the saints have, when we think of the great saints, and they're glowing with uncreated

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light and levitating while they serve liturgy, and working miracles, and seemingly reading people's minds. And Saint Anthony says about them, they have nothing, nothing, nothing more than the gifts of God that had been given to them in proportion to their gratitude and their love towards God.

In other words, all the saints did was deepen their gratitude towards God and their love for God. And God in his nature, being loving, and being compassionate, and being generous gives them what we call holiness. The saints have nothing more than the gifts of God given to them in proportion to their gratitude and love towards God himself.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.