

We are diminished without gratitude

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Few vices rankle us more than ingratitude, which is not to say that gratitude is at or near the top of the list of virtues. Love and justice, for example, deserve all the space they occupy up there.

But Shakespeare was tapping deeply into ordinary human emotions when he wrote the lines: "Blow, blow, thou winter wind! Thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude" (As You Like It, II.vii).

More conventional expressions such as "That's gratitude for you!" or "What an ingrate!" may lack Shakespeare's literary elegance but they convey the same raw sentiments.

Many of us are willing to make generous sacrifices of time, energy, or money for others for no higher reward than a simple "Thank you." We may hasten to reply, "Don't mention it," or "No trouble at all," but that, too, is a convention.

We do expect to be thanked for services and gifts rendered to another when they are over and above the call of duty. And we are bothered by a lack of appreciation, not because we feel directly diminished by its absence, but rather because we sense that somehow the other person is diminished thereby.

We see a side to the other that we don't like, and it bothers us. Whatever relationship existed between us,



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whether longstanding or transitory, is changed.

The experience is especially bothersome when it occurs within our own family.

How often do we hear parents reminding their children, "Did you say 'Thank you,'" after they have received a gift from a relative or friend? Isn't it one of the first lessons a child learns after learning how to talk?

This is because gratitude is more than a convention; it is a virtue in the full theological sense of the word. And from virtues flow character — moral character.

A virtue is a power (the literal meaning of the word) to do what is morally good, even in the face of ob-

stacles. Virtues have to do with relationships: with God, with the neighbor, with the world, and with the self.

Gratitude primarily affects our relationships with God and our neighbor, as is obvious. But it also affects our relationships with the world and with the self.

A lack of respect for the environment is a form of ingratitude to the Creator who gave it to us. A failure to express gratitude also diminishes us as a person. It reflects an erosion of character.

As Catholics we believe that gratitude is at the heart of our Christian lives. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy teaches that the Eucharist is "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed (and) the fountain from which all its power flows" (n. 10).

And the word "Eucharist" (derived from the Greek) means thanksgiving.

Before all else, we Christians are people who give thanks to God for the gifts of creation, redemption by Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the promise of eternal life.

We are like the 10th leper of the Gospels who returned to Jesus to say, "Thank you," for having been healed.

"Were not the 10 made clean?" Jesus asked. "But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner" (Luke 17:17-18).

Notice that Jesus did not say, "Wait until the other nine reach home this evening. Their leprosy will be restored."

Instead, all 10 who were healed remained healed, just as the whole of humankind has been redeemed and remains redeemed. But only one segment of the redeemed human community "returns" to give thanks in the name of all for the gifts that God has given us in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In our ordinary human experience, gratitude is the sort of virtue we usually take for granted in ourselves and in other people. We only seem to notice it when it's missing.

It's not so much that those who do a service or give a gift need to be thanked for it, as it is that those who receive a service or a gift need to give thanks — for their own sakes, not the gift-giver's, and for the integrity of their own moral character.

Similarly, God does not need our thanks. God is God with or without our gratitude. It is we who are diminished by its absence.

The instinct of parents, therefore, is properly directed when it seeks to instill in very young children the habit of saying, "Thank you." One might even suggest that it's a matter of teaching Eucharist from the earliest stages of life.

The Thanksgiving holiday seems as appropriate a time as any to reflect on such things.

Ask right questions with right motives

By Father Albert Shamon
Syndicated Columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 18:33-37; (R1) Daniel; 7:13-14; (R2) Revelation 1:5-8.

Did you ever keep a record of what you thought were the world's worst questions? One that embarrasses me to no end is to have someone you haven't seen for years come up to you and say, "Don't you remember me?" and then stare at you until you remember. Or someone arrives an hour late and says, "Did I keep you waiting?" I know one that gets teenagers: "When are you going to grow up?"

Have you ever played the "book-choice" game? One question is, "If you were stranded on a desert isle and could have only one book, which would you choose?"

G.K. Chesterton gave perhaps the best answer when he said: "A book on 'How to Build a Raft,' of course."

Sunday's Gospel is shot through with questions. Pilate asks four: "Are you a king?" — a dangerous question; "What have you done?" — a loaded one; "So you are a king?" — a tricky one; and finally, "What is truth?"



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, two literary giants, were also good friends. Boswell, however, had a habit that rather annoyed Johnson. So one day he confronted Boswell about it. "Bozzy," as Johnson affectionately called him, "why is it you always answer my questions with a question of your own?" Boswell responded, "Do I now?"

The first question Pilate asked Je-

sus was, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Apparently, that was the official accusation made against Jesus by the chief priests. Pilate's question was dangerous — an imprudent answer could bring His condemnation as a revolutionary.

Jesus answered Pilate's question with a question: "Are you saying this on your own?" As procurator of Judea, Pilate had eyes and ears among the people and would most certainly have known whether someone was claiming the hated title of king. "Are you speaking of a political king according to Roman understanding?" Jesus asked. "Or have you just been hearing talk about a Messianic kingship?" Pilate repudiated the question with a scornful, "I am no Jew!"

So, Jesus explained, He is a king, but not a political one as Pilate was thinking. His kingship is twofold: (1) it is not of this world; and (2) it is a spiritual kingship, related to truth.

With Truth looking him in the eyes, Pilate asked, "Truth! What does that mean?" Obviously Pilate was not of the truth. The judge was himself being judged. Somehow later on, Pilate answers his own question, "Are you the

King of the Jews?" by having the inscription I N R I (Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews) nailed to the top of the cross on which Jesus died. He himself had changed the question to a statement: "You are the King of the Jews."

The irony here is that Pilate hears the voice of truth, but he does not listen.

That's the trouble with questions: if we ask them with the wrong motive, we will get the wrong answers. The right questions asked with the right motives are the scissor blades that cut to the heart of truth.

So, some right questions:

What has top priority in my life — truth or things?

Who influences me more in my actions — Christ, my peers or public opinion?

Does my life match the truths of our faith?

Do I pray, do I make sacrifices so that His kingdom will come on earth, as it is in heaven?

Jesus sought admission into Pilate's heart. He still seeks admission to every other human heart. Do I admit Him or do I just bandy words with Him as did Pilate?

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