

Thanksgiving 2021

Many of you are familiar with the *Magnificat*, a monthly publication with the readings, reflections, lives of the saints, and more to enrich one's life of faith and prayer. The other day, I jumped ahead to Thanksgiving and found the 1893 proclamation for this national holiday from then-President Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes wrote in part:

Over the wide territory of our country, the earth has yielded a bountiful return. The health of the people has been blighted by no prevalent or widespread diseases. No great disasters of our commerce have brought loss and hardship to merchants ... in all that concerns our strength and peace and greatness as a nation; in all that touches the permanence and security of our government ... in all that affects the character and dispositions of our people and tests our capacity to uphold the equal and free condition of society, the experience of the past year is conspicuously marked by the protecting providence of God and is full of promise and hope for the coming generations.

Presidential speech-writing aside, the headlines of the past months are certainly a stark contrast to this survey of serenity and success. You know our common struggles well and I won't rehearse them here. But those struggles make it all the more important that we gather in the presence of Jesus, our Redeemer and Healer, to share in this Thanksgiving Eucharist ... *to do as St. Paul urges: to give thanks always and for everything, even a share in the Lord's Cross.* That mystery of God's sacrificial suffering is at the heart of what we do and who we are as believers. In faith, then, we do not measure God's goodness by worldly success and prosperity, but by the strength and hope we find in Christ's love that never abandons us. God's mercy is the same in our best moments and our worst, our joys and our sorrows. Of course it is easier to be grateful for our blessings, and it is absolutely right to do so. But faith allows us also to be trusting when things don't go so well. Loved by God, no matter what we experience, we have every reason to be thankful.

For many years now, I have referred to a birth announcement I once received just before Thanksgiving. It was a picture of two little girls, sisters for Christian virtues, holding their newborn sibling, the third child in their growing family. The card read: *“Faith and Grace announce the birth of Hope.”* Besides being endearingly cute, it was also a profound statement of theology: Faith, our belief in God, and Grace, the gifts that God continually bestows in our lives, gives birth to Hope, our assurance that despite the challenges and sorrows of life, God will always provide. It has served for some years now as a simple Thanksgiving message – in faith, to acknowledge God’s gifts and grace, and persevere in hope.

But this year, a new chapter needs to be added. Four months ago, I was at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Winona, speaking at the funeral of Laurel, the mother of those three, plus three more born later. Bishop Quinn, hundreds of family, friends, and so many Laurel had served in her career as a physician and as an advocate for the lives of the unborn, crowded that church. There was naturally some lasting shock and profound sadness that such a beautiful, vibrant, and generous life was suddenly over at only 44. But even more, there was gratitude ... gratitude for a legacy of love, generosity, unshakeable faith, and kindness that will endure undying in the lives and memories of those touched by her goodness, that she herself attributed to God’s grace at work.

Sorry if this is a little heavy, but maybe that’s fitting for Thanksgiving 2021. Today, bring your thanks to God for all the blessings and graces you know day by day. They are just as real as the problems, even if they sometimes seem more fragile. But also bring thanks for those things that are difficult to understand or fit into the picture of God’s goodness. For faith, renewed by grace, gives birth to hope ... a hope that will not disappoint.