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Deo Gratias

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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love Thee, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

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The Nature of Gratitude to God

“But he, taking him, healed him.” St. Luke 14:4.

We have hitherto treated of the gratitude we owe to God for the benefits he has bestowed on us, and we have seen,

1. That He expects a constant, unceasing gratitude from us mortals, since He confers benefits on us out of pure goodness without hoping to gain anything Himself thereby, and He never ceases doing good to us for a moment.
2. That He expects this gratitude solely in order that He may thus be induced to bestow still greater benefits on us; from which we came to the conclusion that he who has but a little is already rich enough, and can obtain from God all that is necessary for his salvation, provided he is only grateful for what he has already received; therefore we should at once return heartfelt thanks to God even for the least benefit.
3. We have represented to ourselves the number of the general and special benefits that God showers down on us daily, and on which we hardly bestow a thought; from which we concluded that every man with any sense of honor should be unceasingly grateful to God.
4. We have experienced feelings of horror for that vice; for, as a general rule, they who are most endowed by God with worldly goods are most wanting in gratitude to him. But now, if you wish to know what you are to do so as to prove your gratitude to God in a fitting manner, I shall answer your question in this sermon.

I. True gratitude to God consists chiefly in loving Him with our whole hearts above all things.

II. How are we to know whether and in what degree we have hitherto been grateful to God?

I. True gratitude to God consists in three things. The first is, to acknowledge the benefit received. The second is, to praise His benefactor and return Him thanks. The third is, to make what return one can according to circumstances and opportunity. Therefore true gratitude must show itself in the memory; for certainly a benefit is never worse bestowed than on one who hardly ever thinks of it, nor acknowledges in his heart that he has received it. It must show itself in speech and outward signs, by which the inward feelings of the heart are declared in praising and speaking highly of one's benefactor. David had, as it were, not tongues enough to give

expression to his feelings whenever he recalled the benefits conferred on him by God; and therefore he begged of all creatures in heaven and on earth to help him in sounding the praises of God. The three youths in the fiery furnace at Babylon, through gratitude at being preserved by God unhurt in the midst of the flames, invited all creatures to join with them in praising their Creator. Finally, true gratitude must show itself in our thoughts, in our hearts, so that we endeavor to make what return we can for the benefit received.

The love of God above all things comprises these three conditions. Nay, if that love is wanting, none of the other requisites of true gratitude can be present. For I can look on what I have received as a real benefit without on that account loving my benefactor, and that is what all ungrateful men really do. I can also give utterance to expressions of the deepest gratitude, and praise him who has done good to me, without loving him or wishing well to him; such is the conduct of hypocrites and time-servers, who are skilled in paying empty compliments. I can even make some actual return for the benefit received, and give my benefactor twice what he has given to me, without loving him; and this is according to one of the maxims of the false, treacherous world, which acts in that way through policy, human respect, self-love, and the desire of gaining the esteem of men. But the all-seeing God does not accept that as true gratitude. No, it is the heart, it is true love that he wishes for first of all.

The two first-born sons of our forefather Adam, Cain and Abel, offered sacrifice of thanksgiving to God; but how differently their sacrifices were accepted! "The Lord had respect to Abel and to his offerings. But to Cain and his offerings he had no respect" (Gen. 3:5). Why? I know well that some look for the cause of this difference in the gifts offered; because Abel, as a shepherd, offered the first and best of his flock; but Cain, the husbandman, offered only the last and most worthless of the fruits of the earth. But, why was Cain's gift worthless in the sight of God? Because, while he was offering his goods, he did not offer himself, since his heart was filled with earthly desires. Abel first offered his heart, and then his goods, so that his sacrifice was valuable. Therefore God looked favorably on the sacrifice of Abel, but rejected that of Cain, because it was not offered with true love.

Seneca tells us that Aeschines, a pupil of the philosopher Socrates; when he saw his fellow-pupils giving presents to their master, and knew that his poverty made him unable to imitate their generosity, went to Socrates and said to him: My dear master, I am too poor to show my gratitude to you as I ought; I have nothing but myself; but what I have I give you with all my heart, and present myself to you. Truly, answered Socrates, you have given me much more than all the others! See there, my dear brethren, the best and most acceptable thank-offering we can make to our God and Lord. No matter how much I give him, he looks on it all as of no value if I keep back myself. God wishes to have my heart, and my whole heart, namely, the whole love of my heart; that alone is enough to satisfy him. But by this I do not mean the act of charity that we make now and then during prayer; for that is only a fitful, intermittent love, that has no constancy. I mean a constant, lasting love, a will once for all firmly determined to serve God with all possible zeal, to keep His commandments inviolably, to avoid even the least deliberate sin, to be fully resigned to His will in all things, and to do everything when, how, and because God wills it to be done.

If, then, true gratitude to God is to be measured according to our love for God, where shall we find you in the world? How many even amongst us Christians resemble those of whom our Lord complains: "Hypocrites, well hath Isaias prophesied of you, saying: This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me" (Matt. 15:7, 8). We are generous enough to God as far as words go. When we are engaged at prayer in the Church, or at public devotions, one act of thanksgiving follows the other, one act of charity the other, while we repeat those acts of love and gratitude a hundred times before our ordinary confessions and Communions. "This people honoreth me with their lips;" all this is mere outward show, mere empty words; but where is the heart meanwhile? For that is what God wishes to have from us. Is it completely resigned to his holy will and determined to put away all that is displeasing to Him? Are you ready to give up even that sensual attachment to that person, of whom you think a hundred times a day with impure love before you raise your mind to God, who is present, looking at you? Are you ready to put aside that secret wrath against that man who has injured you, and whom you therefore cannot bear to look on favorably? Are you willing to put aside that inordinate desire of temporal goods, which some times keeps you from serving God as you are bound to do? That human respect, through which you often neglect your duty, or say and do what is contrary to the law of Jesus Christ, for the sake of pleasing men? That inordinate love of your children, which makes you bring them up without due care, not chastising them when they deserve it, but encouraging them to lead idle, worldly lives, although negligence

in this particular would be enough to make your Judge pronounce sentence of condemnation on you, even if you had no other sin on your soul? Have you put away out of your heart all these and many similar faults? No, you cannot make up your mind to do that; the great God, in spite of all His goodness to you, is not able to get that much out of you.

Again, how many of us perhaps side with those tepid Christians, who, although they find God so generous to them, are so niggardly to Him that they wish to love Him only so far as they are bound to do in order to avoid mortal sin and eternal damnation? Tell those Christians that they must give the first part of the day, as the most agreeable, to God by prayer; that every evening, before retiring to rest, they should assemble their families and, as all good Christians do, have night prayers and the examen of conscience, thanking God for the blessings given during the day, and begging His pardon for the faults committed; that on Sundays and Holy-days they should be regular in going to the Church to hear sermons, so as to be encouraged to serve God and be instructed in the duties of their state; that they should frequently go to confession, so as to keep their consciences always pure; that they should often approach the table of the Lord with becoming devotion and reverence and humility, so as to obtain copious graces from God. What! They say or think at once, to excuse themselves, I am not bound to do those things under pain of sin; I can do or omit them as I please; it is enough for me not to break the commandments in serious matters. Ah, blind mortals that you are! How little you value your souls and your salvation, since you refuse to do what would make it easier to keep the commandments, and without which it is, humanly speaking, impossible to keep from breaking them! Do not these excuses of yours show clearly enough your odious ingratitude to God, since you refuse to give Him anything to which you are not strictly bound, and which is not absolutely necessary to save you from the fire of hell? Shame on you!

If the just God had done nothing for you hitherto but what He is strictly bound to do, O ye miscreants! In what a wretched plight you would now be! God is not bound to give us anything, and yet, out of pure generosity, He has given us everything that we have and are; while we are so niggardly in measuring out our service to Him that we give Him only what we are bound to under pain of sin, only what the fear of hell forces from us. Is that gratitude? Is it not rather odious meanness towards the good God?

And, finally, what are we to think of those who, instead of constantly loving God, do not hesitate to offend Him, in spite of His goodness to them, by grievous sin? Instead of the continual grateful remembrance of His benefits, their imaginations are always deliberately filled with sinful thoughts and images, so that God can find no place therein. Instead of praising and blessing God, their tongues are occupied with impure discourses and conversations, with which they mislead innocent souls and bring them into sin; or with uncharitable talk, by which they injure their neighbor's good name and reputation; or with cursing and swearing, with which they rail against the good God when and wherever anything happens to cross their humor. Thus, instead of giving their hearts altogether to God, they drive Him away from them most cruelly, and close the door against Him, so that He cannot enter. This is a terrible thing to think of, but still more terrible is it to remember that there are many of the kind amongst Christians. There is a well-known old fable about the hedgehog. In the beginning of the spring, tormented by the cold and frosty winds, it came before the burrow of the rabbit, and begged of the latter to give it room until the cold weather should pass away, or else it should die. The rabbit consented, and allowed the hedgehog to enter. But as soon as the latter found its way in it began to unroll itself and displayed its prickly spines, so that the poor rabbit, not finding room to escape them on account of the smallness of the hole, was grievously wounded. It began to cry and complain; is this the thanks you give me, it said, for sheltering you? Keep off a little, at least; you see that I have not room to escape being hurt by your prickles. What! Said the hedgehog; if you have no room here, go elsewhere. And the poor rabbit had to leave his home and seek shelter in some other place. This is a fable, but it is a true picture of the ingratitude of men towards their Sovereign Benefactor. They speak to Him fair and make a thousand acts of gratitude and love with the lips; they cry out and appeal to Him when they are in want. Oh, how well they can then humble themselves, and submit to Him! But when it comes to actual proof, when they have got possession of the house, how unbecomingly they act towards their Host! That is, when they have received many benefits from God, and things go according to their wishes, oh, then they cry out: Away with God, we do not want Him here! When they are sick and bedridden, or oppressed with sorrow, or suffering persecution, they are most diligent in prayer and visiting the church; they shed copious tears, and often receive the Holy Communion with great devotion. But when they are restored to health, or freed from the trouble that oppressed them, what do they do? They spend their time in dancing and

amusing themselves, in following the luxurious customs of the world, and offending God. They know very well that God and mortal sin cannot dwell in their hearts at the same time; but, for the sake of gratifying their wicked desires and passions, they do not hesitate to commit many sins. God complains and, as it were, says to them: You hurt me; I have not room in your heart. Is that your thanks for My goodness to you? Away with You, then! Is the terrible answer they give, at least in act, to their good God; away with You! I care not for Your company.

Ungrateful man! Do you turn God out of your heart because He has overwhelmed you with good things? Cannot He who has given you all you have take it away from you again? Cannot He who has given you health again send you a grievous illness? Cannot He who has blessed you and your household hurl you down into the depths of poverty and want at any moment! And yet you treat Him with contempt at the very moment when things go according to your desires? Oh, blackest ingratitude which any man or even irrational animal can be guilty of! But what do I say? There is even a worse degree of ingratitude to be found amongst men. What is it? Hear what God Himself says by the prophet Isaias: “Thou hast made me to serve with thy sins; thou hast wearied me with thy iniquities” (Is. 43:24). You have forced Me to serve you against Myself on account of your sins, by those very benefits you received and do daily receive from Me. By the clear understanding I gave you, you have compelled me to help in your double-meaning expressions, which conceal the worst kind of poison for souls, and which you give utterance to amid laughter and merriment, to the great scandal of those who hear them; nay, you do actually commit those abominations to writing and scatter them abroad in all places. By the wealth I bestowed on you, you have made Me help you to gratify your pride, dissoluteness, revenge, and intemperance. Thus you have, as it were, compelled and forced Me to be thy helper and cooperator in offending against My own law.

That is a fine way to show gratitude! And yet these very people pray in Church with others, and praise God, and thank Him with the lips, and offer Him the holy Mass as a sacrifice of thanksgiving! Away with such prayers! Away with such works of devotion and thanksgiving and acts of love! “To what purpose do you bring Me frankincense from Saba? Your holocausts are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to Me.” Why not? “Because they have not heard My words, and they have cast away My law” (Jer. 6:20, 19). And again, by the prophet Isaias:

“To what purpose do you offer Me the multitude of your victims, saith the Lord? I am full. Offer sacrifice no more in vain! Incense is an abomination to Me! My soul hateth your solemnities: they are become troublesome to Me; I am weary of bearing them. And when you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away My eyes from you. But if you wish your thanks offerings to be pleasing to Me, wash yourselves, be clean, take away the evil of your devices from My eyes, cease to do perversely, learn to do well” (Is. 11:13, 17). Ask with the prophet Micheas: “What shall I offer to the Lord, that is worthy,” for all the benefits God has showered down on me? Shall I kneel before the high God? Shall I offer holocausts unto Him? (Is it enough for me to offer him a hundred Masses?) Shall I give my first-born, (and sacrifice him like Abraham?) All this will be of no good as a return for the benefits I have received, unless my heart is pure, and I am fully resigned to his holy will. “I will show thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requireth of thee.” What is that? “Verily, to do judgment, and to love mercy, and to walk carefully with thy God” (Mich. 6:6, 8), and to love him above all things; in this true gratitude consists. Amen.

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