

# THANKSGIVING AND WHATEVER

By Sean Fitzpatrick (Article found at catholicexchange.com)



**Whatever—a word that means nothing, and is therefore meaningful in an age of nihilism.** “Whatever” encapsulates the rabid relativism of the day, where no one really cares about anything special because everything is “really special.” Live your truth. Do what’s right for you. *Whatever.* This widespread attitude expressed by the widespread convention of this word as a watchword is both a symptom and a source of the decline in one of the highest of human actions: gratitude. It is an attitude that Roman Catholics must rally and rise up against to restore the human and humane balance of thanksgiving.

Whatever thanks are, they are important and imperative. Thanks are an act of sublimity, of holy duty and happy integrity. In the words of Chesterton, “I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” Thanksgiving is worthy of such exaltation as it completes the triumvirate of prayer: praise, petition, and thanks. Looking to the “Our Father” as the paradigm of prayer, however, it is curious that there is no part in this beloved passage devoted to thanks. Our Lord never gave in this guideline a guide for giving thanks. Praise and petition are clearly prompted, but thanks are not. But the reason for this is given precisely by not giving it at all—thanks cannot be dictated and still be absolutely genuine. Thanks are deeply personal, and their expression rests with the receiver. Prayers of thanks arise from heartfelt recognition and appreciation for the grace, the gift, given. They are particular and precise—anything but the stance conveyed by “Whatever.”

As in prayer, so too in lower communications and relations: thanks must play a part in social interactions, in friendships, for only thanks can complete and compliment a gift given in an act of loving kindness. A person’s ability to give thanks, and to give thanks well, is in direct proportion to the quality of his friendships *and* his virtue. This truth is the reason why thanksgiving and the art of giving thanks is in decline. Nowadays, people suffer from social isolation passed off as social interaction. Distant connections and Facebook friends dominate society. These warp and weaken the sense and even the need to give thanks, for not much of anything is ever really shared or given anymore. Appreciation is only approachable and appreciable through direct

contact. Too much in the world is become sterile, stilted, and prophylactic, as Wordsworth bemoans:

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

“Whatever” is the slogan of the Internet and of those whose communal activities are dictated by the Internet. Whatever—do whatever, say whatever, whatever works. The age of “social” media and online “friendship” has brought about a society and friends grown strange to the richness of human gratitude. In an age of individual entitlement and instantaneous indulgence, thanks are becoming lost. Gratification is not the same as gratitude. The urge to give thanks is diminishing to the same extent that friendship and human relationships are diminishing. What thankfulness could possibly arise from such a *laissez-faire carte blanche*? What thanks could possibly be due for such listless license? What thanks are necessary when anything goes?

Whatever.

This is the modern crisis of Thanksgiving and it is judged by the modern crisis of human relationships, as the latter is a means and measure of the former. Insofar as friendship is under attack, the same can be assumed for the capacity to give true and proper thanks. Without friendship, there is no need to articulate thanks, either to man or God. The word, or mantra, “whatever” again becomes a terrible touchstone of the times. For, in addition to its nod to a type of moral relativism which is a hindrance to virtuous friendship, the word also impedes friendship by being an invader of speech, diluting diction and serving as a verbal filler for substantial expression. “Whatever” cripples conversation, and conversation is a prerequisite and a parameter for friendship. “Whatever” shuffles and shrugs off encounters with spoken realities and even ideas that are more real than the virtual fodder and babble most have grown accustomed to. “Whatever” is an impediment to friendship both as a conviction and a colloquialism, and as such, an impediment to the inclination and ability to give authentic thanks.

The “whatever” phenomenon has a very specific translation in the American observances of Thanksgiving. As comedian Jim Gaffigan has it, “Thanksgiving—it’s like we didn’t even try to come up with a tradition; the tradition is we over-eat... we do that every day!” Thanksgiving is rapidly becoming more and more about stuffing oneself with impunity rather than emptying oneself with humility. To be blunt, it is often more orgy than liturgy. Though feasting with family and friends is a good thing, is Thanksgiving really a giving of thanks? Whatever. It often seems more about theatrics than thanks. The occasion is there, but not the habit. There is too much “whatever” in the world to find breathing room for meaning, for an indispensable prayer—but gratitude must find its place at the banquet and in the heart. There is no room for “whatever” when thanks are to be given. The toxic nebulosity people have grown dull to, even addicted to, should be shaken from its stupor with a real and sudden surrender to the grasp of gratefulness and its consequent expression of thankfulness. “Whatever” is antithetical to thanksgiving and its purgation from the mind and mouth is essential to the return of Thanksgiving and the return of giving thanks.

Recall and reconsider this famous story from the Gospel of Luke:

And as he entered into a certain town, there met him ten men that were lepers, who stood afar off; And lifted up their voice, saying: Jesus, master, have mercy on us. Whom when he saw, he said: Go, show yourselves to the priests. And it came to pass, as they went, they were made clean. And one of them, when he saw that he was made clean, went back, with a loud voice glorifying God. And he fell on his face before his feet, giving thanks: and this was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering, said, Were not ten made clean? and where are the nine? There is no one found to return and give glory to God, but this stranger. And he said to him: Arise, go your way; for your faith hath made you whole.

Our faith, our thankfulness, can yet make us whole again; a faith that is made clear and made known by a rare thanksgiving. The ability and art of giving thanks is hindered and handicapped by the self-defeating apathy of “whatever,” for the automatic response is to take things for granted rather than with gratitude. The central sentiment of American Thanksgiving thus stands threatened in the rise of an impassive, yawning globalism and the fall of American thankfulness and thanksgiving. Though Thanksgiving is an earthly holiday of harvest and largely secular in its modern observations, it behooves Catholics to revive its spirit together with the sense and skill to give thanks for gifts far greater than the fruits of the earth—the gifts of friendship and fellowship. Let the words and exhortations of St. Paul be the Thanksgiving prayer of every Catholic family gathering in America:

*Always rejoice. Pray without ceasing. In all things give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you all. Extinguish not the spirit... Be instant in prayer; watching in it with thanksgiving... Walk with wisdom towards them that are without, redeeming the time.*



# BREAKING BREAD AT A BROKEN THANKSGIVING TABLE

By Jenny Uebbing (Article found at catholicexchange.com)



**America, are you ready for this?** After a long political season fraught with conflict and tension, after a year filled with heartache and geopolitical unrest, and in a culture that seems increasingly hellbent on divide and conquer, you are cordially invited to celebrate the great national feast of giving thanks and breaking peaceful bread with your neighbors.

They might be your actual neighbors, from down the street. Or they might be the neighbors you share a mortgage and a last name and a dishwasher with, a little closer to home. You'll probably be seeing a few neighbors who share some of your genetic makeup and perhaps inhabit a zip code far from yours, and there's a high probability you'll encounter your *least* favorite neighbors during this blessed occasion.

You know, the one's you've unfollowed on Facebook in a fit of exasperation or anger. The ones who don't understand reality, who have infuriatingly different political or spiritual identities from your own. Who don't understand, who won't understand, who intentionally misunderstand — you're sure of it — your point of view and your way of life.

But you're going to be sharing a turkey with them in a few days. (Or a ham. Or a vegan casserole, in which case, you have my condolences). And so this thing that impossibly separates you from a harmonious and cordial relationship is going to have to be sorted out. Or at the very least, set aside for the express purpose of maintaining a loving, charitable atmosphere for the sake of the entire party sitting around the table.

That's a tall order in the era of unfriending, unfollowing, unwilling and unrepentant. We have become much accustomed to life in our virtual echo chambers, even if unintentionally, and so mingling peacefully with varying and diverse points of view may be a dull or nonexistent tool in our kits. And that's okay. There's no time like the present to get it sharpened up again, ready for use when you gather with friends and loved ones later this week. But the important thing is to use it. **It is increasingly important to cultivate the beautifully human and necessary skill of encountering the other.** And doing so in charity and real acceptance.

Acceptance of their dignity, their humanity, and their fundamental identity as a beloved child of God.

We live in a culture that has confused acceptance and tolerance with tacit approval. So when we actually *do* encounter competing worldviews or differing opinions, we don't know quite how to behave. Do we

smile and nod in false approval, pretending for the sake of getting along? Do we angrily cross our arms and exchange heated words, destroying the atmosphere around the table for the rest of the crowd? Or is there perhaps a third way?

A way to embrace what we hold in common without embracing the sins and sufferings that really do cause pain and division.

A way to sit down for a peaceful, joy-filled holiday meal without exchanging regrettable words or sitting in stony silence.

**I would propose that there is. But that it is only possible with Christ.** And only to the extent that we are able to invite Him into our homes this holiday season, and into the most difficult and strained relationships with our friends and family, asking Him to sanctify and strengthen what has been broken, and what is still broken.

Being Jesus to your family members means loving them where they are, and realizing that love does not equal approval or acceptance of the brokenness, but rather, approval and acceptance of the *person* in their brokenness. Like Christ Himself. His thanks-giving dinners were fraught with potential conflict as he dined with sinners and tax collectors, mingling His divinity with the brokenness of our humanity, meeting us in our suffering and extending a merciful hand to be reconciled with love.

(A necessary aside, as this gospel is often misunderstood to paint Jesus as dining with we sinners and clapping us all on the back with a jovial “keep up the good work!” and definitely not making any demands that we start behaving ourselves, or that we take His proffered hand and climb out of our wretchedness and misery. No. He came to *rescue* us from our sin, not to pat us on the back as we wallow in it.)

So for your family gathering this year, bringing Christ might mean having a hard, potentially painful conversation with adult family members *beforehand*, expressing both your unwavering love and your expectations about how everyone will behave in front of the impressionable and innocent children in attendance.

It might look like a frank discussion of what will and will not be tolerated, in terms of language and behavior, while you are gathered together.

It might look like biting your tongue and resisting a snarky comment about politics or a pointed criticism of such and such a public figure. And offering up the desire to be right and praying instead for the grace of humility.

And try to avoid igniting sparks. This year doesn't have to go down in the books as Adele's SNL skit.

Try talking about sports, instead. About the first thanksgiving and how remarkable it must have been to see two cultures mingle together and celebrate the miracle of having survived that first long, hard year in a new land, and how unexpected and radical the charity offered between those first American neighbors. Talk about the miracle of our peaceful experiment in democracy and that it still stands, and avoid particulars if it will ignite the table. Talk about books you've read this year, about trips you've taken, about crazy stuff your kids or your bosses have said.

Get to know each other again, without an agenda or any seething animus. Set aside past year's hurts and take this year at face value, taking the chance to start fresh and make amends, if only by behaving like grown ups for the occasion.

And be sure to eat more pie than you think is wise. Thanksgiving, after all, only comes once a year.

## CLOSING PRAYER – BY JOHNNY CASH

Thanksgiving Prayer

from [www.traditionalmusic.co.uk](http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk)

capo 2

G D EM C G D

G D EM

We've come to the time in the season

C G

When family and friends gather near

D EM

To offer a prayer of Thanksgiving

C D

For blessings we've known through the year

C G

To join hands and thank the creator

C D

And now when Thanksgiving is due

G D EM

This year when I count my blessings

C D G

I'm thanking the Lord He made you

D EM

This year when I count my blessings

C D G

I'm thanking the Lord He made you

I'm grateful for the laughter of children

The sun and the wind and the rain

The color of blue in your sweet eyes

The sight of a high ball and train

The moon rise over a prairie

Old love that you've made new

This year when I count my blessings

I'm thanking the Lord He made you

This year when I count my blessings

I'm thanking the Lord He made you

And when the time comes to be going

It won't be in sorrow and tear

I'll kiss you goodbye and I'll go on my way

Grateful for all of the years

I thank for all that you gave me

For teaching me what love can do

Thanksgiving day for the rest of my life

I'm thanking the Lord He made you

Thanksgiving day for the rest of my life

I'm thanking the Lord He made you

