



UNITED THANK OFFERING

Ofrenda Unida de Accion de Gracias

...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in work or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus; giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)

The Letter to the Colossians, written in the Pauline tradition, admonishes community members to embrace thankfulness as part of the ethical code that is to shape their way of life together. It seems that in the author's mind, living thankfully is not just a good thing to do, but it is in fact the right thing to do. Yet, thanksgiving is not simply *something* he asks his listeners to do, rather he approaches thanksgiving as a state of mind and heart that has been brought about by the experience of God's grace through new life in Christ. According to the author, being a follower of Christ Jesus means that one is "rooted" in him, "built up in him" and thankful in all things by "abounding in thanksgiving."¹ New life in Jesus here seems to mean that thankfulness is now a part of one's new character, having been raised with Christ. This understanding seems to expand

¹ Col 2:7 New Revised Standard Version

upon Paul's earlier exhortations in his letter to the Thessalonians that they "give thanks in all circumstances."²

Out of all of the New Testament writings, it is the letters from the Pauline tradition that most fully bring us an understanding of thankfulness that is appropriate for Christian communities. Indeed for Paul, thankfulness *does* appear to be an attitude and practice that he has taken on as part of his witness--most of his letters begin with him giving thanks to God for the community he is addressing. Yet as noted above, the Pauline tradition continually connects thanksgiving to an understanding of proper living--a kind of orthopraxy (or right practice) that also serves to transcend differences in practice among the members of each community. Paul often came upon disputes around meals and the understanding of what could and could not be eaten. The argument against was usually on the grounds that the food was not kosher or it had been used in a ritual to an idol and so some felt that this food was improper to consume. Others, particularly Gentile believers, believed that in this new faith no such food was off-limits. This was apparently a dilemma for more than one community and we see Paul responding to such questions in his letters to the Romans and the Corinthians. In both writings Paul's answer to all parties, regardless of where they fell in the argument, was to do what they felt was right. Whatever they did, they were to do it with thankfulness for it is the thanksgiving that ultimately justifies the person's actions. This picture of thankfulness is especially supported in I Timothy where Paul rejects false teachers (whoever they were) who seem to be encouraging people to abstain from marriage and food. He writes that everything

² 1 Thess. 5:18

made by God is good, and should be received on the condition that it is received “with thanksgiving [recognizing] that it has already been sanctified by God.”³

Beyond the question of food and righteous living, Paul was connecting thanklessness to paganism or idol worship. In the first chapter of the letter to the Romans, Paul outlines the wickedness and guilt of humanity in its rejection of God. Among the list of wrong-doings committed was humanity’s refusal to honor God or give him thanks.⁴ The reason for such evil, he argues, is humanity’s desire to turn to idols. Likewise, in the Pauline Letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges the community to renounce idolatrous behavior by avoiding “...obscene, silly and vulgar talk; but instead let there be thanksgiving.”⁵

In light of these passages, and after all that has been written about thanksgiving, it appears safe to assume that thanksgiving in the Epistles is essential and central to a believer’s life with, and worship of, God. There cannot be proper worship without sincere thanksgiving; nor can there be proper living without thanksgiving at the center of that life. The argument seen throughout the Pauline tradition indicates that at our center, Christians, having received God’s grace and love are to be thankful people.

The work of the United Thank Offering emerges as an extension of that thankfulness; the kind of thankfulness that fills our hearts and sees its fullest expression in our worship. UTO, in its work to further the Church’s faithfulness to God’s mission in the world with its daily reminder to us to be thankful and to expand that thankfulness, echoes the Great Thanksgiving we offer each Sunday. In other words, being thankful is a

³ 1 Thess. 4:3

⁴ Rom 1:22

⁵ Eph 5:4

eucharistic practice and is so by taking all its meaning from our regular practice of hearing scripture, the taking and blessing of the bread, and the going out into the world—the Eucharist.

We can make this connection between Eucharist and the UTO by looking closely at the shape of the United Thank Offering's own practice. It is a practice that centers on people: individuals and families making daily and prayerful offerings that go beyond simply putting coins into the UTO's Blue Box by transforming this simple receptacle into an icon of connection with God and God's mission. It is placing each coin in the box with intent and purpose, knowing that one is partaking in ministry around the church. This is done with prayer and thanksgiving, being mindful of all God has done for us and for those others who are also making their thanksgiving. Just as we do in worship, the UTO invites us to remember God's saving work in our lives and of our role as members of the Body of Christ to *be* the Body for the world. And there are particularly good connecting points to note.

One such connection is that this is an offering, just like we make during our worship when we present the bread, wine and money at the altar. There, we understand the offering to be a "...representative gift of the baptized and forgiven people of God...[where] the congregation offers *itself* and *its world*. Money represents the work of the congregation."⁶ In a gesture of thanksgiving, we present all that we have and are to God for his service. It is no different for the United Thank Offering because it is not asking people merely to take up a collection, it is asking us to continue what we've begun

⁶ Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *The Church's Teaching Series: Liturgy for Living* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 198.

at the altar in the giving up of ourselves to “become his body in this world...”⁷, *as* the Body in the world. The UTO is inviting people to continue to offer themselves to the mission of the Church.

Another connecting point is found in the UTO’s commitment to “Expand the circle of thankful people” through the ministry of the Church where, again, we find its grounding in the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that we are restored to unity with God, unity with each other, and then sent out to participate in God’s work of reconciling with the world. In the experience of giving thanks through offering up our gifts and receiving Christ in the bread and wine, the Eucharist sends us out transformed to serve the world. The UTO practice, likewise, continues these same acts of thanksgiving through continuing our offering and hence, advancing the Church’s participation in God’s mission.

The act of giving thanks, whether one places a coin in the Blue Box or is lifting his or her heart to the Lord in worship, requires one to remember. Remembrance, or anamnesis, is at the heart of thankfulness. Yet, it is not merely a dwelling on the past. Jesus’ command to “Do this in remembrance of me” not only calls to both mind and heart what God has done but also draws attention to what God is doing now and will continue to do. In the Great Thanksgiving, our act of remembering is followed immediately by the memorial acclamation which acknowledges that our thanksgiving encompasses the past, present and future and serves to shape our Christian life. As Melody Beattie writes: “Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for

⁷ *ibid*

tomorrow.”⁸ Whenever we as Christians are asked to give thanks, we are asked to remember in this same manner—connecting the gifts with which God has blessed us with the present mission into which God is calling us. All of this is undertaken in joyful and expectant hope of Christ’s final return to us. By virtue of asking us to give thanks, the United Thank Offering asks us to do just this.

And finally, there is something universal about the UTO’s practice, meaning that it is not confined to one particular place but connects faith communities here in the United States, to others located across the globe in places like the Phillipines. Just as the Eucharist is not confined to one particular place but is celebrated in many places and communities which are bound up in the Body of Christ, the UTO places acts of thankfulness back in the home where our own eucharistic prayers originated.

Reminiscent of early Jewish table prayers, which happened in the home and gave blessing and thanksgiving to God, the UTO with the Blue Box, creates a similar opportunity for domestic thanksgiving and blessing. With its emphasis on offering and mission, it is a thankfulness that does more than remember all that God has done for us, but in eucharistic fashion draws us into the very life and work of the church. Part of this perhaps comes from the relationship between blessing and thanksgiving. Thanksgiving automatically leads to blessing, and hence, once again, to mission. When we are thankful, we want to bless, to in some way return what we’ve been given. Elizabeth Bartlett writes this about thanksgiving:

“Yes, I have found that it is not enough for me to be thankful. I have a desire to do something in return. To do thanks. To give thanks. Give things. Give thoughts. Give love. So gratitude becomes the gift, creating a cycle of giving and receiving, the endless waterfall. Filling up and spilling over. To give from the fullness of my being. This comes not from a feeling of obligation, like a child’s obligatory thank-you

⁸ Melodie Beattie, *Codependent No More: How To Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring For Yourself*, (Minnesota: Hazelden, 1986).

notes to grandmas and aunts and uncles after receiving presents. Rather, it is a spontaneous charitableness, perhaps not even to the giver but to someone else, to whoever crosses one's path. It is the simple passing on of the gift."⁹

Thanksgiving doesn't stay with the one giving thanks. Like the Good News of Jesus Christ, it is passed along, shared freely with the world.

Thus, practicing daily thanksgiving this way is not simply a duty, but a means of connecting to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to the greater world that so needs to be connected in holiness. Sensitivity to others and to life experiences is an automatic process for all humans. We are formed by all inputs, whether relationships with others or, the experiences we gain through our senses. If we live in fear, our natural reactions have more to do with retreating, often resulting in isolation and depression. Intense hatred, likewise, alters our body chemistry pushing us to strike against, to express anger either through subtle words and actions or abusive behavior. Integrating more positive and gracious ways of relating to others and to the world around us in turn calms our bodies and affects our relationships in such a way as to engage and connect, resulting in a smile, eye-to-eye contact, recognition of what/who is present and a willingness to go forward and discover. Ultimately, being more open to each other and our world allows us to open ourselves to a more thoughtful and considerate life experience and to live more wholly into God's love. Thankfulness, when embodied, nourishes our being and in turn allows us to not only offer it to God but to incorporate it in our relationships in daily life. The United Thank Offering invites us to give thanks, that we give a coin as a tangible gift--an offering of ourselves, which is then given to the work that alters the course of peoples' lives...testimony to God's grace in the world.

⁹ As quoted in: Richard Emmons, *Thanks! How The New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 7.

In this sense UTO offer us not a mere opportunity to help, but a practice of faith. It is through our thankfulness, grounded in our shared experience of the life of Jesus, that our hearts, minds and spirits are directed toward God. Indeed, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin says, “We are not human beings on a spiritual journey, we are spiritual beings on a human journey.” We were created to open ourselves to God’s grace, and reflect on the amazing things that God has done for us, both the little things that happen to us and the gift of Jesus Christ. Offering thanksgiving for things as simple as a baby’s smile, the sun, the harvest, a college acceptance letter, the return of a loved one, or a note from a friend helps us recognize the things in our lives which we often take for granted. On the other hand, thanksgiving can emerge from experiences as deep and profound as finding our way back to God after a period of despair and spiritual wandering. There are countless examples of thanksgiving, but none so timeless as our writing: humans are well invested in writing psalms and prayers of thanksgiving as constant reminders to ourselves and others of the importance of this practice. Hence, the Book of Common Prayer, which, besides being centered on thanksgiving, offers many specific references to giving thanks. And many more are also being written, to give thanks for God’s grace and the gift of life to all humanity and all living things.

No matter how we do it, we can always give thanks, because we can always pray. We might sing or dance our prayers, we might kneel, sit, stand or lie down, but no matter how we do it we are called to pray always, anywhere and everywhere, silently or aloud. Our prayers, especially those of thanksgiving, become a way of life, a daily discipline of responding to God’s abundance. The outward and visible sign of our thankfulness is the Blue Box into which coins are placed to accompany our prayers. The mission projects the

UTO funds are the result of unnumbered prayers of thanksgiving offered daily by unnumbered people throughout our church. These are people who have opened their hearts to God and who are participating in the mission of the church by offering themselves to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. When we look at a mission project funded through a UTO grant, we should imagine all those invisible prayers and outreaching hands that have been offered from grateful hearts, providing yet another reason to give thanks--again.

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