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See of St. Mark

COPTIC ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE

THE LIFE OF THANKSGIVING

BY H.H. POPE SHENOUDA III



H.H. Pope Shenouda III, 117th Pope of Alexandria and the See of St. Mark

The Story of This Book

1. I gave a lecture on the life of Thanksgiving at the Conference of Sunday School Teachers in 1965, which was held at St. Mina's Church, Mandara, Alexandria. It was published with other lectures - in a book titled 'For You My Son'.
2. I gave another lecture at St Mark's Cathedral, Anba Rewais, Cairo, on Friday 16th May 1980 and its topic was 'Giving thanks always for all things ' (Eph 5:20) This lecture was not published.
3. Also, a third lecture - not published - was given at St Mark's Cathedral on the occasion of the New Year, on 31st December 1980 mainly on the Life of Thanksgiving, and a part on the Life of Submission and Hope.

GOD gave me time during my trip to Russia this month so I combined the three lectures, with many additions in one book on the 'Life of Thanksgiving ' which is now in your hands. We have published the first lecture in 1965 in a book with contemplations on the prayer of Thanksgiving which was given at St Mark's Cathedral in 1964. They have been reprinted several times by St Mary's church Moharam Bey Alexandria. We hope - God willing - to publish the contemplations on the Prayer of Thanksgiving amongst a book on the joint prayers in the Agbia, e.g. Psalm 50 the Holy Trinity and have mercy on us, O Lord have mercy on us.

Pope Shenouda III

Moscow: June 1988.

CHAPTER ONE: LIFE OF THANKSGIVING

He who lives the life of thanksgiving is a noble person. He acknowledges and does not forget a favour. He NEVER forgets any good offered to him, and expresses his thanks.

Thanksgiving is in his heart and on the tip of his tongue, for God and men.

The Lord Jesus blessed the Samaritan - one of the ten lepers who were cleansed - when he was the only one to return to Jesus *“and fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks”*. So Jesus answered and said, *“Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?” “Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”* (Luke 17:15-18) Therefore, when you give thanks, you are glorifying God, acknowledging his love and kindness to you.

If God has done something good to you through anyone, you give thanks to God and also to this person, who was the means in receiving such goodness.

Most people give thanks to God at the beginning and end of each day, and on occasions like new year, feasts, and certain important events in their lives. But the life of thanksgiving has its characteristics, perhaps in the first place is the saying of the apostle: *“Giving thanks always for all things”* (Eph. 5:20).

Giving Thanks Always

Then our giving thanks to God has no specific occasions but it is

“always”. And as long as it is continuous, it covers the whole life and therefore the expression “Life of Thanksgiving” applies to it.

The same teaching was explained in the first epistle of the Thessalonians, *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks”* (1 Thess 5:16-18).

On account of this, the Prayer of Thanksgiving precedes all prayers:

All the church rituals and masses begin with the prayer of Thanksgiving, also the seven prayers (in the Agbia), both in the morning or at night. We always give thanks to God “evening and morning and at noon”. Also the Psalmist says *“at midnight I will rise to give thanks to you, because of your righteous judgments”*.

In addition to the general prayer of thanksgiving, we give thanks in absolutions of the hours:

In the first Hour we say “ We thank you O Eternal King, for you permitted us to pass this night in peace and brought us to the day break “ ... we thank Him for keeping us safe during the night and giving us a new day in life.

In the Third Hour we say “We give you thanks for raising us up to pray at this holy hour, where you poured Your Holy Spirit in abundance, upon your disciples and honourable apostles like tongues of fire”

In the Sixth Hour, we say “We give thanks to you O our King The Almighty, Father of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ, we glorify you because you made the time of suffering of your Only Begotten Son, a time of prayer and comfort”.

In the Sunset prayer, we say “ We thank You, O our Compassionate King, for you granted us to pass this day in peace, and brought us thankfully to the evening, and made us worthy to see the light until sunset.

We thank God for every hour that passes in peace. Then, it is a continuous thanksgiving either at the beginning of every prayer or at certain occasions.

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Thanksgiving For All Things

The church begins with the prayer of thanksgiving even at funerals. The apostle says, *“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God”* (Col 3:17)

We thank You on every occasion, in every condition, and for all things.

So, it is not only giving thanks always, but also for all things, because God continually makes good to us. The Apostle said: *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God”* (Rom 8:28) , either in the apparent good or in matters that seem not for good, but in fact it is good and we do not know!

For this we call God the “Beneficent”. He does not do except good, and the person who believes in this, gladly accepts everything which comes from Him and says in faith “... All things work together for good”, and gives thanks to God. But, some might ask and say: we believe - without doubt - that whatever comes from God is good but what about that which comes from people and might not all be good?! We say to them: if the attitudes of people towards us were

good, it will reach us good, but if it were not, God will change it, and it will reach us good at the end.

The brothers of the righteous Joseph sold him as a slave; their action was in itself evil, treachery, lack of love, cruelty and envy. But God changed that evil into good and Joseph *“was made a father to Pharaoh, and Lord of his people”*. He was the second in the Kingdom and his stay in Egypt was to preserve life. He told his brothers, *“you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, ... to save many people alive”*. (Gens. 50:20)

The children of God are always joyful, they thank Him for all things.

And when they thank Him, its not merely in compliance to the commandment “give thanks” as an imposed order!! No, because this is not the true thanksgiving. To give thanks is not just words to be said without conviction, as if performing a duty.

But they thank God from all the heart and with all confidence. They are completely confident that God will not allow anything bad to happen to them, and being Almighty, He watches all matters occurring to them, and takes a stand in their favour. For this reason, the life of thanksgiving is bound up in the life of faith, as will be seen when we talk about the virtues relating to thanksgiving.

Man could thank God by words, and could offer a sacrifice of praise, peace offerings, or vows. As the Prophet David said, *“I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all people”* (Psalm 116:13-14).

Levels Of Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving in the life of the children of God is in levels: The least is giving thanks for the miracles, gifts, great pleasures, and the plentiful good things, which no one doubts its goodness and benefit. Perhaps, other than this, some do not give thanks! Simple pleasures might pass over them, and other good things they might see as natural and normal and needs no thanks!

There is a higher level of thanksgiving; to give thanks over little:

It might be a normal level in the life of thanksgiving to give thanks over the recovery from a serious illness like cancer. But, if a person gave thanks for the recovery from a flu or cold, it indicates that in his life he is used to give thanks over many or little things.

If we give thanks over a few things, God will make us rulers over many things.

Perhaps, among the advantages of thanksgiving are the continuity of the blessings and its increase, as one of the Fathers said, "No gift is without increase, except that without thanksgiving".

There is also thanksgiving over what is hidden, over what is unseen.

Thanksgiving for the wars and troubles which were possible to come to us but did not because of God's keeping and care. Thanksgiving for the work of God in looking after us, although we cannot see that, but we completely believe in it. Undoubtedly, Satan is doing his utmost to harm us and to make us fall. If we are now well, it is because God has stopped the harm which we do not know and we thank God over the tribulations from which He saved us, but there are difficulties that He stopped on the way before it came to us. We do not know it, but we thank Him for protecting us ..

Our thanksgiving for saving us, this is something we can see. But,

thanksgiving for protecting us is for something which we cannot see.

Believe me, if God showed us the problems we were exposed to and He protected us from, our whole life would not be enough to thank Him.

We give thanks on the hidden matters - which are in God's knowledge, and which we might know later, in time, or might never know.

In all this, thanksgiving is mixed with love.

Another level is giving thanks always for all things, in which the whole life of man is to give thanks for whatever condition he lives in, and we have explained this matter. Constant thanksgiving does not need a specific reason but it is enough that we are in God's care, and we are His children, and such feeling is connected with the life of submission. Our thanks do not absolutely depend on the specific condition in which we are in.

Thanksgiving Over Tribulation

The highest level of thanksgiving is to give thanks over tribulations.

We thank God over the tribulations from which He saved us, and this is the least. But, what is greater than this is also thank Him over the prevailing tribulations which we bear and live in. And with faith we believe it is for our good. To endure and bear the tribulations is a virtue. To be content with the tribulation and accept it is a greater virtue. And more important is to give thanks over the tribulation, to thank with joy and not as mere duty.

Believe me, if we thank over the gifts only, then our love is for the

gifts not for God its Giver!

But, if we give thanks to God over the tribulation, we prove that we love God Himself and not just His gifts i.e. we do not only love Him for what He gives us (wealth, generosity, comforts of life) or what He grants us (calmness and peace). God only is our goal, whether He gives us tribulations or good things, we thank Him on every occasion and in every condition. We thank Him for whatever happens, and do not allow mishaps to lessen our faith in God's protection or lessen our thanks to Him. We do not allow such events to take away our peace from us, or our joy in the Lord. We rejoice in the Lord always - whatever the outer circumstances may be - and live in peace with God and man.

This thanksgiving and joy has its effects on others. And therefore, when they see our thanks over the tribulation, our calmness and joy, they are comforted. Assuredly, when they see our peace of heart, they will be consoled by the spiritual principles presented by the Bible exemplified with our life and behaviour. It is said that the fruit of the Spirit are "*Love, Joy, Peace...*". He who possesses such fruits gives thanks to God.

Also, tribulations need thanksgiving because it strengthen the spirituality. It gives man depth in prayer and depth in the relation with God, depth in fasting and faith. It reunites and lifts the hearts of its children to God. Perhaps a severe tribulation leads man to the life of repentance better than a hundred sermons and reading many spiritual books.

In tribulations, we see the hand of the Lord works.

It shows us the Lord and His work, His coming into our lives and His protection. It show us the power of God and His wonders. It gives us spiritual experiences which we could not attain without the

tribulation. Also, it sifts the church and separates the tares from the wheat. For all these reasons and others, we give thanks to God over tribulation and consider it a blessing. Of course, he who thanks over tribulation shall give thanks for all other things.

So, he lives the constant life of thanksgiving and never complains.

Tribulations Worthy Of Thanksgiving

To illustrate an example, when our Fathers the Apostles were imprisoned and scourged, the Bible says that after they were set free, “...*they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name*”. (Acts 5:41) So, our Fathers the Apostles considered all such sufferings and insults as a blessing they do not deserve because these tribulations are fellowship of the sufferings of Christ.

The Bible says, “*For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake*”. (Phil 1:29).

Therefore, the sufferings are gifts and as long as they are gifts, why don't we rejoice in them and give thanks over it?

St Paul, the Apostle said, “*That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death.*” (Phil 3:10) This is the fellowship of the sufferings for which our Fathers the Apostles rejoiced.

A spiritual person - if the Lord gives him a cross to carry - he shall rejoice and give thanks, as it is a fellowship of the sufferings of Christ.

He gives thanks over tribulation, exactly as he gives thanks over gifts, because tribulation is a gift.

Many concentrate on the sufferings and pain in tribulations, but a spiritual person contemplates on another thing, ie. why our loving Lord allow such tribulations? By all means, there must be something good in them and if we cannot see it now, it does not mean it is not existent. By faith we can see it, even if by viewing we cannot.

We can learn a lesson from the sorrows and troubles of Jonah the Prophet:

Jonah was swallowed by the whale. Would he give thanks over this? Yes, because this was the only way which saved him from drowning, and made him carry out his mission and cry out against Ninevah.

Jonah was saddened when the plant which gave shade to his head withered: But if he stretched his spiritual sight further, he will see that its withering was the introduction to his reconciliation with God; a matter for which he must give thanks.

The father of St. Anthony the Great died. Was this a cause for thanksgiving?

Where is the son who can give thanks over the death of his father?! If it is improper for Anthony to do that, we are the ones to give thanks because the death of his father made this saintly young man contemplate on the triviality of the earthly life. This was the first motive for him to become a monk. He established for us this angelic ritual when he looked at his father's body and said, "Where is your greatness, power, and wealth? You came out of this world against your will, but I shall go out by my will before they send me out unwillingly". So, he left the world and became the father to all

monks.

John, the beloved, was exiled at the Isle of Patmos, Do you think we thank the Lord over this?

Undoubtedly yes, because the tribulation lifted his spirit to the Lord; *“He was in the spirit”* (Rev 1:10). At the exile, he saw heaven opened, and the throne of God surrounded by the heavenly hosts and saw what would occur later, and wrote the Book of Revelation.

No doubt the exile of John was the best days of his life. It was a matter worthy of thanksgiving.

It is important that our vision is not restricted to the bounds of the problem, but look forward to what comes out of it and see the great goodness which the Lord has purposed from it.

If we do not give thanks over the difficulty itself, we thank God over the goodness meant by it.

Men of the world may lose the senses of thanksgiving when they fall into various sorrows and troubles: And if you ask any of them to give thanks to the Lord, he answers you in anger and amazement; *“For what should I give thanks?! You can see the anxieties within me”*.

But the saintly children of God are not bothered with such matters, Why?

Because separation from God is their only worry, and as long they are attached to Him, it is enough for their constant life of thanksgiving.

They thank Him in every condition, in poorness and in wealth, in

sickness and in health, for life and for death. They always give thanks because in all this, they did not lose their main goal which is their attachment to God. You always see them rejoicing and joyful, and they say "If I lose everything, and only God is left for me; this would be enough and I thank the Lord for it."

Because for me God is everything, all in all. Nothing grieves me! Paul the Apostle says, *"Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake".*(2 Cor 12:10). He takes pleasure because distresses make him much nearer to God, and while he is in this weakness, the strength of God comes down to protect him and then he becomes much stronger, and therefore he said immediately afterwards, *"For when I am weak, then I am strong"*. Besides, distresses bring on crowns to him if he endures them.

If something painful happened to a spiritual person, he says unless there is some goodness behind it, God will not permit it and therefore I have to accept it.

Unlimited Thanksgiving

If man lives the true life of thanksgiving, he would give thanks to God over every breath he breathes, every step he walks, every work he does, everything that comes to him. He does not see anything which is not worthy of thanksgiving, and says about all what happens to him, "it is all for the good."

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CHAPTER TWO: FIELDS OF THANKSGIVING

There are many reasons for which we give thanks to God, or are considered a matter for thanksgiving, but we rarely do!

Some things seem just normal, while other things make us joyful, and we feel happy but do not give thanks. Thirdly, there are matters where the work and kindness of God are clearly shown, but we give thanks momentarily. We will try in this chapter to present some of the fields of thanksgiving:

1. Thank God for He created you and gave you existence:

Truly, does anyone thank God because He created and gave him life?! It was possible not to exist, and God was not obliged to add one to the population of the world! Thank God that your mother was not barren, but was given the blessing of giving birth. Your birth is a great blessing from God; it is said in the Psalm, "*Behold children are a heritage from the Lord.*" (Ps 127:3). It was possible that your father could have been denied this heritage or given to your brothers and sisters only, and not you in particular!

In this context, how beautiful are these lines in the Liturgy of St. Gregory, wherein the priest gives thanks to the Lord, saying: "You have created me man - being lover of mankind - and You were not in need of my servitude, rather, it is I who am in need of Your Lordship. Out of your great kindness, You have brought me into being where I was not..."

2. Thank God for the Nature around you:

It is most appropriate for us all to thank God because he created man on the sixth day. He prepared everything for his comfort before his creation. He created heaven and decorated it with the sun, the

moon, and the stars. He created light and laid all the laws of astronomy, which join nature's connections in this wonderful world. He arranged matters relating to air, temperature, and rain. Also, He created plants and animals and other living creatures on the earth, sky, or sea. He produced food for man before He created him. The beauty of nature, gardens and flowers, the singing of birds were created for his enjoyment.

After He prepared all means of comfort, He created man.

Who gives thanks to God for this beautiful nature in its sufficiency and diversity?! The holy church gives us this spiritual practice in the thankful and grateful prayer wherein the priest says, "You have lifted up heavens as a roof for me and established earth to walk on. For my sake, you calmed the sea, for my sake you have manifested the nature of animal. You do not make me need anything of the works of Your Honour..."

3. Thank God for the natural talents He gave you:

Many do not give thanks except for the supernatural talents like healing the sick, raising the dead, spiritual revelation, and visions!

But, who gives thanks to God for the talents of wisdom, and knowledge which were put first, before the gifts of healings and the working of miracles (1 Cor 12:8-10)

For example, do you thank God for what he gave you of wisdom or intelligence or imagination?

And do you thank Him for giving you the talent of drawing or composing poetry or music? or because He gave you a sweet voice, or a beautiful face, or convincing ability, or the power of endurance and patience? All these are talents from God for which we need to

give thanks.

4. Do you thank God for the faith you are in?

Do you thank Him for being born a Christian, and without making any effort to reach this faith?!

As many people desire this faith but cannot find it they toil so much, but cannot reach it because they face many doctrinal, family, social and other problems while you attained this faith freely and easily, as you have been born in it and in this belief.

I heard a story about an atheist philosopher, who saw an illiterate peasant praying. He wondered how this simple man is kneeling in his field talking with God whom he cannot see. The peasant was talking with all his heart, his feelings, with all confidence. So the philosopher said, "I am prepared to give up all my philosophy and all what I studied to have a bit of faith which this peasant enjoys...".

Your faith is a grace which the atheist countries and the atheists in the believing countries never attained.

You also thank God not only for your faith, but mainly because your faith is perfect as many deviated from their faith due to their mixing up with the thoughts of other beliefs, either through their meetings, books or articles. Their faith is not as it was before, but it has changed in its beliefs! You give thanks to God because you are living in perfect faith, away from these doctrinal doubts.

5. Thank God for being still alive:

This conforms what is said in the thanksgiving prayer: we thank God because "He brought us to this hour". My brother, your life is a gift from God; He can keep it or end it at any time. He is renewing it for

you day by day and hour by hour. You thank Him for this day you are living and this opportunity He has given to you so you can improve your spiritual level and do something good.

Thank Him because, with this life, He gave you a chance for repentance.

One writer said, "Millions of millions of those who are in Hades long for one hour of life on earth or even one minute, to offer repentance to God ...".

They want time - however short it is - to submit to God a full confession of their sins, asking for His forgiveness. They want one minute to say the phrase of the tax collector, "*God be merciful to me a sinner!*" (Luke 18:13)

If God decides upon taking away your soul now, wouldn't you wish to have a few more minutes of this lifetime of yours?!

You say to Him, Lord, a few minutes to distribute all my possessions among the poor, "*to lay up a treasure in heaven*" (Matt 6:20). Lord, a few minutes to reconcile to all those I fought with, and apologise to them even if they were wrong. Yes, a few minutes to confess all my sins in detail, even the things that embarrass me and could not be told. I say it without shame "before the door is shut and leaves me standing outside knocking like the five foolish virgins" (Matt 25:10-12).

Yes, why don't you thank God for the life He has given to you?

Why don't you thank Him for the days still ahead of you, in which you can do many things that please God, and make people happy and gain you the kingdom of Heaven; to repent and lead a spiritual life!

Do you thank God only if you find a treasure of money, or acquire a ranking position? How would you know, perhaps such a treasure or position would be for your destruction, and because of it you would lose the Kingdom of Heaven!!

6. Thank God for the religious environment in which you are brought up:

Thank Him because He gave you parents who cared about your baptism, and taught you the way of the Lord or at least they never prevented you from following His way. Thank Him for the servants in the church, who looked after you until you reached such level of spiritual knowledge and became aware of your salvation.

Thank Him because He put good examples in your way, from which you can learn the true life, and assigned someone to guide you spiritually.

Thank Him because you are now in the church. At this moment you find many of the young men enjoying themselves at the different places of entertainment, forgetful of the salvation of their souls. But you, you thank God because you are here in the church, and the church has become a part of your life which you cannot spare.

Had it not been for the grace of God on you, you could not have been like that. Who, among you now, gives thanks to God for embracing him in His house, and entering him in His dwelling place?

Thank God, also, as there are no obstacles to keep you out of His house and not united with His children.

Numerous circumstances hinder many people from coming to church: their working hours clash with church hours, their health conditions, their many travels, living in a village or migrated country

where there is no church, or for any other reason. But for you, you give thanks to God because you do not face any of these obstacles.

Thank Him because your association with His children gives you spiritual strength.

Because they constantly push you forward and you find with them a holy environment where you exchange spiritual talks. Also their behaviour may cause you embarrassment if you misbehave. Your relationship with them strengthens your unity with the church and its activities and meetings. Also, you find in their circles pure, spiritual friendships which satisfy your emotions, and as the Bible said, “Two are better than one, for if they fall one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up”. (Eccl 4: 9-10)

Then, isn't it right that you thank God for your spiritual friendships?

Every spiritual friend is a treasure, for which you give thanks to God. The same applies to the spiritual father or instructor, and whoever supports you in your spiritual life. Thank God for the persons whom He put in your way and you benefited from them. It is He who sent them to you.

7. Also, we thank God because He did not deal with us according to our sins.

This is what David the Prophet said in Psalm 103 which begins, *“Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits”*, until it says, *“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy... He has not dealt with us according to our sins nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the*

heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy towards those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west. So far has he removed our transgressions from us; as the father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.”(Ps. 103:8-14).

And we therefore cry out to the Lord in our prayers saying “according to your mercy O Lord, and not according to our sins.” How wonderful that God gives us so much; He does not punish us but shows mercy!

How many times, when we are in the depth of sin, do we call upon Him and He answers lovingly, as if we did not sin against Him and did not break His commandments! He makes us feel bad by His love and compassion. Don't we thank Him very much for all this?!

He who looks at his sins and how they are ugly, he wonders how God is merciful and very patient with him..

How many sins, which seem much simpler than yours, received severe punishments :

Ananias and Sapphira lied to Peter the Apostle by keeping back a part of the money, and the result was that they both fell down and breathed their last, without being given a chance to repent. Nevertheless, how many people repeatedly lie every day.

They may lie to priests and head priests and God is patient not to punish them. The Lord Jesus says “... *but whoever says, you fool shall be in danger of hell fire.*” (Matt 5:22) How many times we say this phrase, or the like in meaning then we confess and God forgives us with no danger of hell fire.

+ Herod the king was glorified by the people who said , “*The voice*

of a god and not of a man. Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. and he was eaten by worms and died.”(Acts 12:22 - 23)

And when we are glorified by people, we keep silent and God does not punish us!

+ Zacharias the priest, because he did not believe in having a son at his old age, he was punished by God by keeping him mute for nine months, until the child was born.

Don't we sin every day more than Zacharias the priest, and yet no punishment!

Then, don't we thank God for not dealing with us according to our sins?! Let us count the sins we commit every day, perhaps every hour, which God encounter with great patience! Yet, we are living and with tolerance of the Lord, it will lead us to repentance.

We thank Him for His wondrous endurance. People do not put up with us over a few things-they are liable to be at fault like us-and God the All-Holy, the righteous and the just, bears many things which we repeatedly do everyday , and yet we do not thank! He endures us. He bears all the sins people commit all over the world, at all times, in the past and now and in the future. He did not strike the people with great plagues as He did before; the flood and the fire on Sodom and yet we do not thank Him!!

Will you not kneel down and say. “I thank you Lord because you endured, and still endures me and my ingratitude! Truly Lord you are good and kind. How truthful is the saying of David the prophet, *“O God, who is like you? Among the gods there is none like you. O Lord ”* (Ps. 71:19); *“Nor there are any works like your works.”* (Ps 86:8)

It is beautiful to contemplate the dealings of God, either with you or with others, as well as to contemplate His good attributes which you admire, then you thank Him for it. You thank Him because He is kind, good, loving, forgiving, patient, and, *“He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.”* (Ps 103:14) and treat us accordingly.

8. Thank God for His loving-kindness and care:

Thank Him for His loving-kindness to you and all your friends, relatives, acquaintances and other people. Thank Him for His loving-kindness to the family, the church and to the nation. His general and private loving-kindness.

Sit with yourself and review your life since your birth:

How many times you pleaded with the Lord and He granted your plea? How many times He delivered you out of your troubles? How many exams He made you pass and you were not prepared for them? How many times He healed you? How many problems He solved for you? How many sins you committed and were not revealed to people? How many times He was with you in your service and activities? How many times you were given grace in the eyes of others? How many offenses He delivered you from?

Can you count His loving-kindness to you?! I suppose this is not possible! How much more if you add to it His loving-kindness to your beloved and the good things that came to you without prayer and even without asking, but because of the abundance of His grace and love . All this, put it before you and give thanks in every detail, especially the matters which were very complicated, and no one can solve except God record all this lest you forget.

9. Thank Him for your state of health:

Who gives thanks to God because he can see?

But if his eyes caught a disease and began treatment, he then feels the gift of vision, for which he did not give thanks before.

Who gives thanks to God because He can walk on his feet? But if he suffered a fracture in his leg and needed a walking-stick to lean on, he then realizes that walking on his feet is something we should give thanks for. It is true the proverb which says, “health is a crown on the heads of those who are well, only the sick can feel it.”

It is common that we can not feel the value of the thing we have unless it is lost. We therefore give no thanks to God because the systems of our body are sound, unless one became defective. No one thanks God for a sound stomach which digests food well. But, if it became sick with an ulcer, he then gives thanks to God for every day his stomach goes normally, without any pain and with no medicine taken?

Therefore thank God for your good health, as many desire to be in your position, and they cannot.

10. As you thank Him for the good health, thank Him also for the sickness

Sickness in itself is not bad; poor Lazarus was full of sores and dogs were licking his sores. But, all this was not bad in itself and did not separate him from God, but on the contrary it was for his own good. When he was taken to Abraham’s bosom, it was said that, “*in his lifetime he received evil things; but now he is comforted.*” (Luke 16:25)

St Basil the great said, “you do not know what is good for you: health or sickness.

The Apostle St. Paul was given a thorn in the flesh for spiritual benefit , *“Lest he should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations. He pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from him. ”* (2 Cor 12:8). But God did not answer his prayer, but said to him, *“My grace is sufficient for you”*. Naturally, in our human weakness, we seek good health but we do not know what is beneficial to us.

Perhaps Sickness makes me weary, but it helps me enter the kingdom of Heaven. It was told in “The Paradise of the Fathers” that a wealthy nobleman had an only daughter who was ill and nearing death. He asked one of the saintly fathers to pray for her recovery. The saint tried, by all means, to excuse himself, but the nobleman insisted. The saint prayed and the girl became well, but she lead a disgraceful life which brought shame to her father who wished her death!!

It is surprising that many speak only of pains in sickness: without mentioning the blessings and benefits of sickness! Some could reach a state of grumble and distress, and even they could ask God “Why have you done all this to me?” But you should not be like that. In your sickness you thank God for the blessings you received because of this sickness:

Say to Him, I thank you God for this sickness which gave me more time for prayer, or repentance and granted me humbleness and broken heart and a feeling of my weakness. I thank you God for this sickness which made me feel the love of people. I thank you because this sickness gave me a period of isolation which I spent in bed - which was necessary to me - at least to search out my soul and be with you.

11. We also thank God because He has protected, assisted, preserved, accepted us, had compassion on us, supported us

and brought us till this hour.

This is what the church teaches us in the Prayer of Thanksgiving, which we repeat many times in the Prayers of the Hours (AGBIA) every day and each contemplation.

We have published a special book “contemplations in the Prayer of Thanksgiving” issued in 1964 - and re-printed several times - you can refer to it .

12. Thank God also for the good you see and the good you cannot see.

You thank him for the good you observe by sight, and the good you see by faith. God who calls us to do good in secret, and He sees what in secret and reward us openly (Matt 6: 4-6). He also does many good things in secret for which we must thank him openly. Much of the good we now enjoy, God was preparing it for us since many years ago, and we did not know. And He is still preparing many good things for us, the outcome of which will appear in the future, and then we will thank Him for it. He is doing good for us now and at all times, but we cannot see!

Every good deed we are doing, the hand of God is in it, and had it not been for that, we could not have made anything good at all. Isn't He the one who said , “*...Without Me you can do nothing.* ” (John 15:5)

Then it is Him Who works in us and with us. Here, St.Paul the Apostle says: “*For it is God Who works in you both to will and to do, on behalf of His good pleasure.*” (Phil. 2:13)

13- And here we must thank Him for the grace working in us:

Grace is among the principal matters which we must put at the top of our list of thanksgiving. The Apostle St Paul says, *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace towards me was not in vain, but I laboured more abundantly than they all, yet not I but the grace of God which was with me!”* (1 Cor. 15:10) Doesn't He deserve all the thanksgiving for this grace working in us?!

We then thank Him for the communion of the Holy Spirit in our lives, which is a part of the blessing given to us. We thank Him because He made us temples of His Holy Spirit, as the Apostle said, *“Do you know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you.”* (1 Cor 3:16) The Spirit of God which dwells in us *“will convict the world of sin”* (John 16:8) and *“will teach us all things”* (John 14:26) and *“will guide us into all truth”* (John 16:13). And *“He will give us the power to serve and we will be witnesses to God in every place.”* (Acts 1:8) Don't we give thanks always for the work of the Spirit in us.

If at sometime we did a good work, we give thanks to God for what we did, because He is the one who did it through us.

It is a big mistake because instead of giving thanks to God, we boast and thank ourselves, as if we had done this work by our power of godliness. This boast hinders the work of grace in us that we become righteous in our own eyes (Job 32:1) and therefore we grieve the Holy Spirit. Would we then remember the saying of St Paul *“..He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”* (2 Cor 10:17).

Because it is God who gives the will, strength, and the knowledge, and without Him we cannot do anything. If St. Paul says, *“Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”* (1 Cor 15:10), what can we, the weak and powerless, say. What we can do is to thank God and give back the credit to Him, then the work of grace will increase in us and the fruits will multiply.

14. Also, thank God for the great redemption He offered to us:

There is something more important than all the previous things, for which we ought to give thanks all day and night. It is the great redemption offered to us on the cross, and without it, we all could have perished. Who of us thanks our Lord Jesus Christ for being crucified for our sake? Because He became incarnated and shed His blood for us? No one could have been saved from the sentence of death without the incarnation of the Son, His crucifixion and His death.

With His death, Christ saved us because He died for us. Who of us, each day and each night remembers the cross of Christ, and gives thanks to Him because He paid the price on our behalf, and without this price, the good deeds or repentance or anything else could have been of no use.

Christ died for us and we became “...justified freely by His grace.” (Rom 3:24)

Then shouldn't we thank Him for the free salvation we received?

This salvation in which we made no effort, and which God arranged for us without our asking! And surely we were not worthy “*But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.*”, “... in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:8,6) “*The just for the unjust*” (1 Pet 3:18). What a great love and what a sacrifice? We ought to put this salvation always in front of us and give thanks to God for it..

The church reminds us of this matter in many occasions lest we forget.

Every year it celebrates the Passion Week (Pascha) and Good

Friday with its deeply effective memories, so that we cannot forget the cross of the Lord, but we remember and give thanks. Is this yearly commemoration enough? No, because we forget. So, the church made Friday of each week a fasting day in which we remember the cross of Christ but is this weekly remembrance enough? No, therefore, the church set down for us the prayer of the sixth hour of the day to remember this great salvation.

Every day we thank God because He gave us such great salvation.

It is a sort of a collective thanksgiving for the whole church, said by all the faithful, "... for You were pleased to willingly go to the cross to rescue Your creation from the slavery of the enemy. We thank you Christ, for You filled us all with joy, when You came to help the world, Glory be to You."

15. We also thank God because He gave us to know Him:

In the prayers of the Liturgy of St Gregory, the priest says, "You gave me your knowledge", and "You sent me the law for support". Do we thank Him for the good news in the Gospel, all what is in the Holy Bible about God, His work and His dealings and His holy attributes?

In the church, when a sermon of one of the saints is read to us, we sing a hymn to thank him because he enlightened the eyes of our hearts with his useful teachings. So we give thanks for the treasures our saintly fathers the prophets and apostles left for us. They left us all the commandments of God, His law and prophecies "*...moved by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Pet 1:21).

We know God in His Book and we see Him in His Son. "*No one has seen God at any time. The Only Begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.*" (John 1:18) and by Him, we

knew the Father and He himself said to the Father, *“O righteous Father! The world has not known you, but I have known you,... And I have declared to them your name, and will declare it, that the love with which you loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”* (John 17:25-26)

Blessed is the Lord who gave us to know Him and His ways. Also, to know His commandments, His teachings, His prophets and saints. We thank Him for this knowledge which we are not worthy of. We thank Him because He gave us to know *“things which must shortly take place...”* (Rev 1:1)

16. We thank Him for His promises to us:

We thank Him for the eternal comfort He is preparing for us in the heavenly Jerusalem *“The tabernacle of God with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people.”* (Rev 21:3). He promised us saying, *“... I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”* (John 14:3). He also promised us with what *“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”* (1Cor 2:9). Also to sit with Him on His throne as He sits down with the Father on His throne. (Rev 3:21). He promised that we eat from the hidden manna and from the tree of life (Rev 2:17 & 7).

These are promises in the eternity, together with His promises to us on earth.

We thank Him for His promise to be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt 28:20). Also His saying, *“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”* (Matt 18:20). We thank Him for His promises to keep us, and His saying, *“But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”* (Matt

10:30). Also His saying to each one of us, “I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands.” (Is 49:16)

17. We thank Him because He called us His children and friends:

St. John the beloved said, *“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God.”* (1 John 3:1). He taught us to pray and say, *“Our Father in heaven...”* (Matt 6:9). He also said, *“No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends.”* (John 15:15). He called us His own, and it was said, *“having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”* (John 13:1) He considered our relationship with Him like the relationship between the branch and the vine, the body and the head and the bride and her bridegroom. He said, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit.”* (John 15:5). The Apostle St. Paul said that He is, *“... head over all things to the church which is His body.”* (Eph 1:23). Also, *“For the husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church.”* (Eph 5:23). He said more than this, *“For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.”* (Eph 5:30). When He mentioned that the church is the bride of Christ, He said, *“This is a great mystery”* (Eph 5:23). Also, John the Baptist said about Christ and the church, *“He who has the bride is the bridegroom.”* (John 3:29).

We also give thanks to God because He made His relationship with us a relationship of love not of fear.

He said the first commandment is, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”* (Matt 22:27). St. John the Apostle said, *“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the*

propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10), He also said “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:16-18).

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CHAPTER THREE: VIRTUES RELATING TO THANKSGIVING

FAITH

The life of thanksgiving is connected with other virtues which precede and incorporate into it. Faith is among these virtues and in particular, I mean the faith in God in certain qualities, without which we cannot reach the life of thanksgiving. In the first place there is:

The faith in God as doer of good things, and lover of mankind for all things.

He loves you as a person more than you love yourself, and cares for you more than you care for yourself, and therefore He always does you good. As lover of mankind He must do good with you even without your asking. He is able to give you all you need, whatever the obstacles may be. He is all powerful.

He is also the Almighty, watches over everything. *“He shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in.” (Ps 121:7-8)*

The freedom that God granted man does not mean that He gave up running the universe, leaving every one to do what he likes without

control. But God gives freedom, observes, watches over everything and guides the affairs according to his good will. He changes what needs change, suspends some matters, and does not allow others and all this needs thanksgiving.

Here, you thank God for His running the universe and preserving you from the wicked.

Fear goes away from you and you feel secure with the protection of God because the evil you fear comes to you from three sources: Either evil people, or the demons, or yourself. And God the Almighty rules over all these sources, and there are many times He blocks something for your salvation whether you know or you do not know. God does not grant absolute freedom to anyone, otherwise the world will perish! Listen to David singing: *“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive, when their wrath was kindled against us.”* (Ps 124:2-3).

Therefore, thank God because He preserves you from evil men *“... and no one will attack you to hurt you”*. (Acts 18:10). If one day you suffered any harm, be sure it is for your benefit and it will end good, and you will receive a blessing out of it. Thank God for all you get, even the evil which God will turn good.

Even the devils are not completely free in what they do.

God does not leave them to their pleasure otherwise they will destroy the whole earth! It is quite clear in the story of Job and how the freedom of Satan was limited; he proposed certain things which God allowed some and denied others, imposing limits and restrictions. First, He said to him, *“Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person.”* (Job 1:12). The second time He allowed him to lay his hand on Job’s body *“... but*

spare his life." (Job 2:6).

Then, thank God who restricted the freedom of Satan. This grants you peace of heart so you do not fear Satan or his allies of wicked men. Peace and non-fear is a blessing for which you thank God and confidently say, *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Rom 8:31). Therefore, you live in permanent security which is also a blessing that needs thanksgiving.

The faithful person lives in peace, security, confidence in God's work, non-fear and with this faith, his life turns to constant thanks.

This faith which caused him the thanksgiving is also a blessing.

He sleeps in the bosom of God peacefully, thanking Him for His care, whatever the pressure of the surrounding circumstances. This is because he constantly looks at the work of God and not the pressing circumstances, and says with David the Prophet in the fullness of faith: *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me."* (Ps. 23:4)

Our short humanly vision might stand against this faith, and consequently, it will not allow the existence of thanksgiving. But it could cause worry, fear, and the feeling that the divine help is far! Our humanly vision is short and limited because it only sees the current problems and does not see the coming solutions! It sees the present pain and does not see the future joy.

Therefore, if you live in the problem, you suffer, but if you live in the faith, you will see many solutions, and become joyful and give thanks to God.

There is a big difference between faith and sight.

Sight means you see the things with your eyes, and you do not give thanks except for the tangible good which your eyes see. But, in faith you give thanks for the good you see and believe in the good you cannot see, trusting in the work of God. Faith sees what the eye cannot see and the senses what we cannot feel.

It sees the work of God and His coming grace and help. Also, it sees the future work of God as if it is existent now, and rejoices with it and gives thanks for it. He sees God leading him into green pastures, and preserves his going out and his coming in. Faith says with the Apostle: *“All things work together for good to those who love God”*. (Rom 8:28)

Oh, that you learn this verse and put it always in front of you so it will be a spring of thanksgiving for you. Take note in this verse the phrase “to those who love God”. Those who love God, they feel His love and trust His promises, and therefore they are very confident that all things work for them for good because it is under the control of God, lover of mankind.

Accordingly they live in constant joy and thanksgiving in line with their love to God. *“Love believes all things”* (1 Cor 13:7). He believes that water can come out of the solid rock (Ex 17:6). He believes that God can make the sea into dry land in which he walks safely, and also believes that God can rain bread from heaven to eat. By faith, he can see God with him in the lion’s den, also in the burning furnace.

PATIENCE

The whole thing is a mere time factor between faith and sight.

You believe in what you cannot see in senses and you give God a

period of time to show you this thing in sight after a while. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”. (John 20:29). Through faith, look at the problems- in the light of God’s intervention- which He turns into good.

Man must be patient and long-suffering to see the work of God. There are works which seem difficult but it turns good in a period of time, which might be long sometimes. Man needs to wait for the Lord, Who without fail, will work at the right time chosen by His good will.

We take an example of what happened to the upright Joseph. He was sold as a slave, and although he accepted that and served honestly and sincerely, a fabricated charge by the wife of Potiphar resulted in his imprisonment. Time went by when he thought that God has abandoned him, but, at the right time, God turned this trial into good, released him from prison to become the first ruler in Egypt. Therefore, it is a matter of patience and waiting for God, believing He is able to turn evil into good.

Also, the story of Mordecai and Haman: For a long time Mordecai received many persecutions from Haman who prepared the gallows for him. He even persevered in his injustice and arrogance that he almost destroyed the whole people. But, at the proper time, God interfered to save Mordecai and the people, and *“Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai”*. (Esth 7:10).

Look at the persecutions which Diocletian blew up against the church. He was a very cruel ruler who shed the blood of many martyrs, but at the proper time God interfered and saved His people from Diocletian, whose life had a bad ending. Constantine issued Milan’s decree in 313 AD, allowing freedom of religion. Christianity benefited from persecutions, gaining depth in spiritualities and

firmness in faith.

There is no problem that lasts forever. Certainly it will end one day, but it needs patience based on faith. Look at Job's trial. It was very hard and it expanded till it covered all his wealth, sons, daughters, friends, and his wife. It lasted for a time but ended into good and better. Our teacher the Apostle James said, "Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the purpose of the Lord." (James 5:11). *"Now the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning...after this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children and grand children for four generations"* (Job 42:12-16).

Job profited spiritual benefits from his trial, which deserved thanksgiving. He profited many good things in his life. Also, in the previous stories, how great are the benefits Mordecai or Joseph and his brothers received, and which were not obtainable except through trial and affliction. But, by faith and patience we see the purposes of God and receive all the good and the blessing.

HUMILITY

To be able to live the life of thanksgiving in its depth, you need to live the life of humility and broken heart.

The humble person feels he does not deserve anything. Therefore he gives thanks for everything. Whatever he is given from God - no matter how little - he thanks God for it and rejoices in it, feeling in his depth that he does not deserve it.

On the contrary, the proud thinks he deserves much more than he has, then he murmurs against what he got. If he obtained a senior position - perhaps he gives no thanks - because he believes he is

worthy of a bigger position. If someone praised him, he might presume that such praise is not to his level. But, the humble feels shy of any word of praise because he knows himself.

The humble not only feels he does not deserve any good, but he sees that he deserves more punishment and rebukes from God.

Therefore, if any calamities befall him, he says I deserve more because of my sins, and gives thanks saying, it is from God to punish me with less than what I deserve. It is good for me to be punished here on earth instead of the eternal punishment.

For example, consider a criminal who committed murder and was sentenced, due to psychological circumstances, to hard labour. Such a criminal, when he hears the verdict, he gives thanks to God, because he knows for sure that he deserves capital punishment and the judge treated him mercifully.

So, the humble always sees his punishments are less than what he deserves. Whenever he suffers any difficulty or affliction, he says, “I thank you Lord because you are very kind. Oh, what compassion! Indeed your hand is on me not your rod...”

Some may object and say, “What if he was given an unbearable punishment?! Like a painful disease which he cannot bear.

How can he give thanks to God in his suffering?!”

We say that the pains on earth, which are limited and temporary, are better than the eternal anguish in its severity and permanence. Nevertheless, even with such diseases, God gives endurance and patience.

The Perfect Objective

Very often, some have worldly or material objectives, and becomes sad if they are not reached, and cannot thank God amidst his adherence to these objectives.

But, the spiritual person has only one objective: God.

Therefore, it does not worry him if the world prospered or elapsed. He takes no interest in its vanishing objects, and does not feel sorry for missing its pleasures. In his content with God, he feels great happiness for which he gives thanks to God. He might be deprived of many things which others enjoy, nevertheless, he is satisfied, thankful, and pleased with his life with God.

Here, we say that the life of asceticism leads to the life of thanksgiving. Or, you can say that God's love - which brings us to the forsake of the world - leads to the life of thanksgiving.

Our fathers the monks and ascetics lived without having anything in the world, yet they live in joy and thanksgiving. By the same token, we see the Apostle St. Paul says about himself and his helpers in the service : *“As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things”* (2 Cor. 6:10) The world sees us as if we have nothing and poor, yet we possess everything, because God Who is with us, He is all-in-all, everything to us. We seem, before people, *“as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.”*

Thus, the life of thanksgiving requires values and spiritual measures, without which no one can reach the true thanksgiving or the complete spiritual joy.

If you find that joy and do not give thanks, go back to correct your understanding of joy. Perhaps your opinion about happiness is not right.

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There are other virtues connected with thanksgiving - discussed before - such as joy, peace, inner consolation amid difficulties, and also the outer consolation and the life of submission to God.

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CHAPTER FOUR: REASONS WE DON'T GIVE THANKS

1. One of the important causes for not giving thanks is the fact that we do not know what is good for us.

We may think that the matter is evil and therefore we do not give thanks, while it is in fact for good, or the means that leads to goodness, but we do not know!

In this respect, we will try to display many examples from the Bible, and some from history, to prove this fact.

Believe me, it is only God, with His vast wisdom, who knows what is good for us. Our humanly wisdom is short and limited, and cannot see what is ahead.

An example of that is the imprisonment of the upright Joseph. Who would believe that unjustly throwing Joseph into prison, and selling

him as a slave before that, would be for his good, for the good of his brothers and father, and for the good of all Egypt and the surrounding countries? If his brothers did not sell him, he could have remained a shepherd near the home of his father, and all this good could not have happened to him! Also, if the wife of Potiphar did not accuse him, he could have stayed as a slave in the house of Potiphar and not a father to Pharaoh!

Perhaps the upright Joseph did not give thanks when he was sold as a slave, and when he was unjustly accused and thrown into prison but, undoubtedly, he gave thanks in the end and knew that *"...God meant it for good to save many people alive."* (Gen. 50:20)

Another example is the flight of the virgin Mary and the child into Egypt. Was the flight from the sword and might of Herod worthy of thanksgiving? We must thank God because with this flight the land of Egypt was blessed, and the places where Jesus and the Virgin walked, became sacred and later churches were built on them.

We do not know what the future holds but we know one thing; that the future is in the hands of God. We thank God because He put the whole future in His hands to manage with His good will and He makes good to His children. We therefore have confidence that all that comes from God's hand is filled with love.

Truly the big heart rejoices in everything and gives thanks for everything, and is never annoyed of anything no matter what.

He has the strainer of faith in which He puts everything through.

By faith, he sees the hand of God in all the incidents he faces, so he is comforted with the work of God; he rejoices and gives thanks.

St. Augustinos says about those who severely fought the faith and caused many problems to the church, “we thank the heretics for the doubts they caused about the Bible which made us search more, in depth, and discover treasures which were not known to us before.”

In the same logic, we talk about the pagan philosophy which resisted Christianity; especially at its early days. This resistance was a blessing for which we give thanks to God. Because of it, the first school of Alexandria was established, with all the spiritual and written knowledge it presented to the world, the sciences of theology and Christian philosophy which served the faith. We thankfully open our hearts to the work of God, because He makes everything revert to the glory of His Name. We rejoice at His hand which holds history and thank Him.

Another example: the blood of the martyrs: was it a good for which we give thanks? Yes, because we say the blood of the martyrs were the seeds of faith, which spread more, as a result of what the people saw and heard of the miracles that happened during their martyrdom, and how they faced death with great joy.

St. Augustinos of Antioch kindly blamed the people of Rome, for their attempt to rescue him from throwing him to the hungry lions!

He sent them a well-known message in which he said, “Brethren, I fear your love causes me harm, for when I have reached the end of the line, you want me to run the course of my life over again.” Then he left himself to the lions to prey upon in seconds. It was a wonderful lesson for the generations to remember and give thanks to him. After his martyrdom, he appeared to his prison-mates to encourage and strengthen them. So, his martyrdom was a blessing. Do we cry the he died a martyr?! No, But we rejoice because he received the crowns, and thank God who helped him and say to him this phrase known in the funeral prayers “God help us as He helped

you.”

In the same way, we speak about the confessors and those scattered by persecution for their faith, and remember what was said in The Acts of the Apostles: *“Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word”*. (Acts 8:4)

Their scattering was among the pains which the church suffered, but, in the meantime, it was a blessing because they were flames of fire and when they moved to other countries of the world, they set it ablaze, and faith spread by their scattering. Isn't this something we thank God for?

There is something which is good in itself, and another thing which is good in its results. We give thanks in both cases. Both are for the good.

God is able to change persecution into good, scattering into preaching and faith, and many churches established everywhere. We thank Him for that, and offer our complete submission to His Holy will filled with good.

2. Another problem for not giving thanks is because we do not look ahead. But we only look at now, to what's actually happening without looking ahead, to what will happen later. We never look at the purpose of God from this matter which is tiring us, I mean his good purpose to us. I give you these two examples:

The birth of a blind person: Was it good for which we give thanks?!

Even the disciples thought it was punishment, and they ignorantly said, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” affected by wrong thoughts which were transferred from the pagan world. But the Lord Jesus put before them the divine planning which deserves every

thanksgiving, so He said to them, *‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’* (John 9:3) Had it not been for his blindness from birth, this great miracle could not have happened to him, which resulted in his belief in God, worshipping and defending Him and he had two open spiritual eyes which see the unseen. And so, he entered history and the works of God were revealed in him, and were the cause for many to believe. This is something for which we thank God.

Yet, unfortunately we do not give thanks until after we see the results!

But faith gives the confidence that there must be a certain good whether we see it or not and *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* (John 20:29)... and *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* (Heb. 11:1)

Another example is the death of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha:

Was the sickness and death of Lazarus a matter that deserves thanksgiving?!

It was obvious Mary wept, and also the Jews who came with her, and she said to Jesus, *“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”* (John 11:32). Martha said the same phrase to the Lord (John 11:21). Yet , all this was *“... for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”* (John 11:4)

If people knew what the Lord would do after the death of Lazarus, they should have given thanks for the sickness and death of Lazarus, to reveal the glory of God.

Faith was much spread by raising Lazarus four days after his death (John 11:45). No doubt this is a matter that deserves thanksgiving. But people would not have given thanks when Lazarus became sick and died! Why? Because our human vision is limited. It can only go to the grave where they buried Lazarus and stand outside weeping! While faith goes forward four days after that, to see Lazarus coming out bound hand and foot with grave clothes and see the glory of God and faith of people, then give thanks.

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Another example: The famine in Egypt during Joseph's time:

There is no one who gives thanks when famine occurs! However, this famine was for the good. It revealed the righteousness and wisdom of Joseph. It presented to us dreams and visions from God, even to Pharaoh. This famine was a blessing and good and because of it, Joseph met his father and brothers and made peace with them, and maintained them in the land of Goshen. It was a chance for his two sons to receive the blessing of his father Jacob. Are not all these reasons for which we give thanks to God?! As for the famine, God had arranged its solution as it was preceded by seven plentiful years, during which food and grain were stored for the years of famine. This is also a divine arrangement which deserves thanksgiving as all things work together for good.

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Let us look at the suspicions that hovered around Pope Demetrius, the vinedresser.

It was a bad thing in itself, but these same suspicions were the cause of revealing the holiness of this great Pope, and showed the people his righteousness, chastity and virginity. It was also an

occasion in which the hand of God interfered miraculously.

The church celebrates this day in the Synexarium on the 12th of Babah.

Undoubtedly, all the congregation gave thanks to God, as well as Pope Demetrius and his wife. The suspicions were turned into glorification and the day of passion changed into a feast-day.

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On this occasion, we talk about the troubles of David the Prophet:

Who can believe that the troubles of David the Prophet - with Saul or Absalom or others - would lead to these beautiful Psalms which comfort us all?! In times of distress, David used to sing his troubles on a ten-stringed harp and flute. He left us this great treasure of songs. Don't we thank God for all this? He also, in all his distresses used to give thanks and say, *"I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall continually be on my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the Lord. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together."* (Ps. 34:1-3)

He also says, *"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."* (Ps. 103:1-2). In all his distresses, he praises the Lord with a new song.

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Another two lessons from the life of Moses the Prophet:

Who can believe that putting the child in a basket and laying it in the reeds by the river's bank for fear of him being killed (Ex 2:3) would

result in glory, and that this child would become the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter and grow up in a palace! Isn't that a lesson of God's care for which we should give thanks?

Who can believe that the flight of Moses to the wilderness in fear of Pharaoh, would lead to his becoming a shepherd, and that later the Lord would appear to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush, and call him to His service? He became one of the great prophets and leaders of people. These are matters which remind us of the saying in the Bible. *"The end of a thing is better than its beginning."* (Eccl 7:8)

Therefore, the difficult beginnings do not disturb us, but if we look how God will end these matters, we will find them happy endings for which we give thanks. A good example for this in the bible is Haman's conspiracy.

Haman was proud and not happy with Mordacai, because he did not bow or pay him homage. He plotted to hang Mordecai and destroy his people. It is a disturbing beginning, but let us wait a little to see how it ended. Under the command of Esther, all the people fasted and it was a spiritual period where they came closer to God, Who interfered and saved them. They hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai who was honoured by the King.

The situation changed completely from the gallows to glory.

Blessed is the Lord in all what He does. Blessed is His hand that interferes and leads the ship to the route He chooses by His blessed good will.

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Another lesson from the trial of the slaying of Isaac:

No doubt it was a bad experience for our father Abraham to offer his only son, whom he loves, as a burnt offering (Gen 22:2). But it was for the good because it showed the obedience of Abraham and also revealed his faith and righteousness. *“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.”* (Heb 11:17-19). And *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”* (James 2:21-23). By this test our father Abraham received the blessing of the Lord who said to him, *“In blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants... in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Gen 22:17-18). In this test, the Lord gave us a good example of obedience and faith for which we thank Him.

So, the test was a blessing for Abraham, his descendants, and for us.

It was a lesson and example for all generations on earth, either with regard to Abraham or to his son Isaac who became a symbol for Lord Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Father (John 3:16) and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Phil 2:8)

An example for thanksgiving: The imprisonment of Paul the Apostle.

Does anyone give thanks on his imprisonment? Yes. A faithful person gives thanks on everything. Paul and Silas were beaten, put into the inner prison, and fastened their feet in the stocks. However, they were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:23-25).

Their imprisonment was a blessing by which the Philippian jailer was saved. And immediately, he and all his family were baptised.

He rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household (Acts 16:33-34). Very often, while St. Paul the Apostle was in prison, he found a quiet time in which he wrote some of his Epistles.

3. From the reasons which keep us from giving thanks, the lack of remembering the benefits of the Lord towards us, either in general or in the private life of each of us. Our fault is that we forget and do not remember. David the Prophet reminds himself and says in his Psalm *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:”* (Ps 103:1-2). He continued to remember it one by one. I advise you to read and memorise this Psalm, so it would be a motive for us to remember His good deeds towards us.

In 1974, cholera was an epidemic and thousands lost their lives. Many cities were closed for fear of infection. Once I visited one of these closed cities - after obtaining a special permit and, of course, after being vaccinated. It was a grieved and gloomy city, no one laughed or smileed, no voice of radio or songs. Many were praying and making vows to God, “If you save me.. I'll do so and so”. God saved us from the cholera and we live to this day. Who gives thanks to God for this saving us from it and from all other epidemic diseases and draughts?

Many are those who forgot the good deeds of God towards us, and also forgot their promises and vows!

If only we would sit everyday with ourselves and remember Gods benefits towards us, our families, friends, and acquaintances, and keep this in our memories or diaries and give thanks to God. The people in the wilderness kept an omen of manna, to remember the benefits of the Lord (Ex 16:32-34). They laid stones in the midst of the Jordan, to remember the crossing and when the waters of the Jordan were cut off (Josh 4:4-8).

When we forget the good deeds of God, our thanksgiving and love diminish. This is natural. Because whenever you remember a favour done to you by someone, you love him. But, if you forgot, you lose a cause which drives you to love and thanksgiving.

How many employees forgot that God helped them to get a job?

How many wives forgot that God helped them in finding a husband?

How many persons forgot that God helped them in solving a problem, or finding a way out of a critical situation?

4. Sometimes we do not give thanks because we attribute the good we received, not to God, but to our personal abilities, or to those who helped us, or to the surrounding circumstances! In all this, we forget that our abilities are gifts from God. Also, those who helped us, God has talked into their hearts for us. And the surrounding circumstances, we cannot separate from the Divine planning.

5. We also do not give thanks, because we remember transgressions more than good deeds!

When we clear up our accounts, all the white points, deserving thanksgiving, disappear, but afflictions and troubles stay before us. There is a kind of people - unfortunately - that only remember the dark points in their life, and therefore, not only do they lose thanksgiving, but depression and sadness overcome them. On the other hand, there are people who live in joy and hope, who remember the good, graces, and blessings of God all the time, and give thanks.

6. Lack of thanksgiving may be because of lack of contentment.

A content person always gives thanks even if he has little, but the

uncontent, no matter what the Lord gives him, is never satisfied, and does not give thanks! He always needs more and therefore he doesn't give thanks!

Ambition of a person could change to greediness and this causes him to lose thanksgiving!

There is a fine line that separates between these matters which man must know and take precaution. A student may pass with distinction at 90%, but he becomes sad because he wanted to get at least 95%, or to become first or among the top five. Supposedly, he has to be glad and thankful because he passed with distinction. There is no objection to become more ambitious, but not at the expense of joy and thanksgiving.

7. A person may lose the life of thanksgiving because of his being accustomed to complaining.

For some, complaining could become a psychiatric disease. He always grumbles, protests, and complains. Nothing appeals to him, nothing pleases him, and consequently, of course, he doesn't give thanks. It is a spiritual, psychological, and social disease which requires treatment.

On the other hand is a person who gets used to thanksgiving until it becomes a character in him. He thanks the Lord and the people and gives thanks for everything.

8. Also, a person may lose thanksgiving for other spiritual and psychological diseases, other than complaining, like greediness, love of abundance and the greater portion, diseases like disturbance, despair, depression, unrest, fear of the future, fear in general, and some other complexes.

Whoever suffers from such diseases, it is difficult for him to give thanks because he is always concerned and confused. If you call him to the life of thanksgiving, he says to you in wonder and annoyance, "For what do I give thanks?! Isn't it enough what I am in?!" Such person needs treatment.

Lack of thanksgiving troubles the soul, and the trouble of the soul takes away thanksgiving.

A thankful person does not need tranquillisers but his peaceful heart is a substitute for these. But the unthankful is always troubled, and this in turn keeps him away from giving thanks.

9. Many do not give thanks because they are content with joy:

They receive a good thing that makes them happy; and they stop at this point. They do not think who sent them this good thing to thank him! Unfortunately, they are centred around themselves and their requirements. Their interest is to have these requisites, but who makes it for them, they do not think about it!! Isn't that a kind of selfishness? But you, do not centralise around yourself and when you receive a good thing, look at its source and give thanks to it. Do not be like the ten lepers who were healed and did not return to give thanks (Luke 17:12-18). Do not look only at the gift without looking at the giver.

10. Among the important things in our perception of good and evil - and its consequences of either thanksgiving or complaining - are our inner desires and valuation of matters.

St John Chrysostom wrote a good article titled "No one can harm a person, unless he brought harm upon himself." In fact, without understanding this issue, we cannot get rid of the effects of the inconveniences of others to us, which make us lose the life of

thanksgiving and drop us in psychological problems.

Truly, what can a person - or even a devil - do to harm you?

If you are a saintly and righteous person who loves God, you have only one goal, ie. to be attached to God. No one can hurt you for this reason. And as the Apostle said, *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulations, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?.. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Rom 8:35-39). Therefore, if you make your goal in life the love of God, nothing will separate you from this goal and will live happily.

But, if you make for yourself other goals and desires, these are the ones that harm you.

Your heart, from the inside - which loves these desires - is the one harming you not the people.

Someone may be able to take money from you. If you do not love money and do not care if it is abundant or little, no harm will happen to you.

Someone may be able to put you in prison. If you only care about the freedom of your mind, thought and soul in your relation with God, and do not care about the place where you live, or your earthly status, then you will not feel any harm. St. Paul was in the inner prison and was singing hymns joyfully.

What can people do to you? Would they kill you? Does this harm you in anyway if your goal is to live with Christ? St. Paul the Apostle

says, *“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain... having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.”* (Phil 1:21-23). The martyrs were tortured and killed; they never felt they suffered any harm, but on the contrary they received crowns. They were thanking Him in their sufferings which led them to God and glory.

The only harm that saddens you is your separation from God. It is not the tribulations or distresses, which could result in receiving crowns, if you bear them with thanksgiving. For this, the Apostle said, “Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake.”(2 Cor 12:10)

11. Of your biggest problems in the life of thanksgiving is holding to your personal thinking rather than the Divine planning.

We would like to arrange our affairs with our human thinking, and according to our own methods. God might have another plan which we do not understand, so we become angry and do not give thanks! For example: if our demands are not met we are angry. Sometimes we go up a step, and do not get angry, but at the same time we do not give thanks.

There is a difference between a thankful person, and another who is quiet and enduring.

Our endurance means that there is distress which we do not grumble about, but we bear in patience. While our thanksgiving means our confidence that this incident is good, for which we give thanks to God. Here, we are moved from seeing to believing and by faith we see good in all what God does to us, not relying on human judgments which decide on the outside.

If the Divine inspiration says, *“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.”* (James 4:17). More truly that God does good because He is able to do so.

Of necessity, I must believe that God does good with me, because by nature He is beneficent and actually He does so.

If my condition was bad, it could have been worse without God’s grace, but thank God He did not abandon me. Probably, my bad state is a result of my faults and I must blame myself. As for God, I have to thank Him because He is not angry with me for my faults, and by all means He will help me to come out of it.

Then, I must have confidence in God’s wisdom and planning and do not rely on my human thinking and limited understanding. In all what happens to me I should say: There must be a divine wisdom behind this affair which will be revealed in time, and whether God revealed it or not, His wisdom exists and we thank Him for it. *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* (John 20:29).

This belief in the wisdom of God leads us to the life of submission, and the life of submission entirely agrees with the life of thanksgiving.

In this life, I say to the Lord: I thank you Lord because if you have found me a better position than my present one, You could have transferred me to it. Or, if I deserve more, You could have given me. Truly, You are always giving me more than I deserve. It is enough for me to believe in Your wisdom and love, in disposing my life and this deserves thanksgiving.

12. Sometimes, we do not give thanks because we forget our sins.

If we remembered our sins we ought to thank God as *“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities.”* (Ps 103:10). But, even if we received a punishment, we have to give thanks, because we suffer here on earth instead of having everlasting punishment in the other life, like poor Lazarus who in his lifetime received evil things. (Luke 16:25)

If we realized the weight of our sins, we ought to give thanks even in the painful sufferings, feeling that they are much less than we deserve, and they were allowed by God, to lead us to repentance.

13. And, we do not give thanks- especially in sufferings-because we did not yet realize the blessing of suffering and its glory.

Suffering is a gift that deserves thanksgiving and as the Apostle said *“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.”* (Phil 1:29). Then, it is a gift with glory too, and it is said, *“... if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”* (Rom 8:17). As long as suffering is a way to glory, it deserves thanksgiving.

Therefore, God did not stop suffering for his friends.

St. Paul the Apostle laboured more abundantly than all the others in preaching and teaching (1 Cor 15:10), nevertheless, he received persecutions and sufferings more than they all as he explained in (2 Cor 11:23) *“...I am more: in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often”*, and God did not keep away all these sufferings from him. But said, when he was chosen to the ministry and apostleship, *“For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”* (Acts 9:16).

What we say about St. Paul the Apostle, also applies to St. Athanasius, pillar of faith, who was exiled four times and many

accusations and conspiracies were plotted against him. He was told, "The whole world is against you", but God allowed all this to happen, because in suffering there is glory and it has crowns, also it is an expression of love.

The virgin St. Mary herself endured many sufferings, and she is the holiest person on earth.

If you endure afflictions for God's sake, thank Him from your depth, because you were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name (Acts 5:41). Thank Him because he directed you to the narrow gate which leads to the Kingdom and life (Matt 7:14).

14. Finally, I say that we sometimes do not give thanks because we consider the good we are in, is something normal which does not need thanksgiving!

You have many good things for which you do not give thanks, like health and shelter, as you count them normal, but those who are deprived of them, know its value, and if they receive them, surely they will thank God for them. Let me give you an example: Perhaps you do not give thanks now for the lights we have during our lecture. But if, for any reason the electricity is cut off, then you realise the grace you were in.

There are many normal matters in our life which need thanksgiving.

Image
