Gratitude: Seeing as Gift

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His experience has included parish life, teaching, administration, retreat work, preaching, and formation ministries. He gives workshops and retreats throughout the world and is active in creating programs for interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.
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Course Overview

“If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough.”
– Meister Eckhart

Transform your life with the spirituality of gratitude.

Gratitude leads you away from the pit of resentment into the garden of happiness. For many people, gratitude does not come naturally; it is rather an art to be cultivated. This course will give you the spiritual and theological underpinnings that are foundational for developing this art.

This 12-lecture course is taught by one of our very best presenters, Fr. Anthony Ciorra, the author of Everyday Mysticism and recipient of the pontifical honor Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice given by Pope John Paul II. Under his guidance, you will explore how gratitude is at the heart of all Christian spirituality and how it offers a path that leads to deeper love and awareness of God, self, and the world.

Although the virtues of gratitude may seem obvious, this course will review the profoundly life-changing power of gratitude-based Christian spirituality. The positive attitude that gratitude fosters will open your heart to love, forgiveness, and peace. These practices are best expressed in the context of community, and thus the art of gratitude proves to be the bridge between profound spirituality and authentic religious practice.

As you will learn, gratitude is about remembering and noticing. Far too often, we fail to notice the beauty of every moment and the presence of God in our daily lives. In this course, you will learn how to return to God and give thanks. This act comes from a radical faith and a joyful hope that “all things will work unto the good” (Romans 8). Life can often be unfair, but nonetheless, we can give thanks in good times and bad because God is always at work in the events in our lives. The art of gratitude will change your life. Fr. Ciorra invites you to move out of your head and to bring the practice of gratitude into your daily living.
Topic 1: All Is Grace

Overview

Gratitude is the gateway to happiness. No gratitude, no happiness! If there is one thing that every person on this planet has in common, it is that everyone wants to be happy. People often live with the illusion that material possessions will bring happiness and security. Money in and of itself is neither good nor bad. It is the value that we place on the material things of the world and how we choose to use things that make these things good or bad. Gratitude embraces the material world as a gift from God and leads the human spirit to that place within that sparks the divine deep within the human spirit.

Outline

1. Gratitude requires a paradigm shift that sees the world and all living creatures as pure gift.
2. The universe as gratis
3. A theology of grace
4. The law of praying is the law of believing.
5. Reflections on the preface used for the Thanksgiving celebration
6. Faith and hope are the two pillars upon which we build a spirituality of gratitude.

Noah Giving Thanks after the Flood by John Martin (ca. 1840)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Keep a gratitude journal throughout this course.

2. Try to live deeper. Slow down and pay attention to what goes on in the people and in the scripture of the universe. Notice and give thanks.

3. Spend some time thinking about your life. What are the things that make you happy? Sad? What does this tell you about what is really important to you?
Topic 2:
Gratitude: A Good and Gracious God

Overview

The longest journey we can take is the journey from the head to the heart. This axiom is especially true for examining and revisiting our images of God. Many of us carry images of God that simply are not accurate. In fact, oftentimes, we have recreated God in our image and likeness. It is hard to let go of old images that are etched deep within the human psyche. If we hold on to harsh images of a vengeful God, fear naturally follows. On the other hand, as we come to know a loving and forgiving God, gratitude naturally follows. This session is especially challenging because it invites us to move away from our deepest fears and embrace the fullness of gratitude.

Outline

1. How God is revealed to us?
2. Who is this God who reveals himself?
3. The God I Don’t Believe In (Fr. Juan Arias)
   - The God who catches the human person by surprise in a sin of weakness.
   - The God who condemns material things.
   - The God incapable of giving an answer to the grave problems of a sincere and honest person who cries out in tears, “I can’t.”
   - The God who loves pain.
   - The God who flashes a red light against human joys.
   - The God who sterilizes human freedom and reason.
   - The God who blesses the new Cains of humanity.
   - The God who is a magician and sorcerer.
   - The God who makes himself feared and dreaded.
4. Emerging images of God
   - The Hebrew Scriptures, e.g., the shepherd, the potter, the liberator, the covenant
     ▶ Hosea: God as a parent
Hosea 11:1-8: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. . . . How can I give you up, Ephraim? . . . My compassion grows warm and tender.”

Isaiah 42:16: “I will lead the blind / by a road they do not know, / . . . I will turn the darkness before them into light, / the rough places into level ground.”

Jeremiah 18:3-4: “So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”

The New Testament

Parables: Prodigal Son, the lost coin

Images: Shepherd, foot washer

5. Jansenism and negative images of God

- Founded by Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638)
- Fear of being damned

6. The Second Vatican Council

- Restoring the Scriptures
- Rediscovering the God who loves us

*Christ and the Adulteress* by Polidoro da Lanciano (16th century)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. What are your earliest remembrances of what you were taught about God? Is there anything in need of healing or change?

2. Read and pray with Luke 15. What does this chapter show you about the way God works in the world and how God deals with us?

3. Read Psalm 136. The beautiful refrain “God’s mercy endures forever” follows every verse of this psalm. Use this psalm and refrain as a template to write your own personal salvation history. Be grateful for the many way you have experienced the mercy of God.
Topic 3: Praying Gratitude

Overview

Prayer is about gratitude and gratitude is about prayer. Even when the prayer we pray is not explicitly about gratitude, gratitude is implicitly at the basis of all prayer. Prayer is an act of adoration and surrender to God, acknowledging that God is God and we are not gods. Once we accept this basic truth, then it is all about giving glory and praise to our God. This session will deal with the centrality of prayer in the Christian life and gratitude as the ultimate act of worship.

Outline

1. Jesus is gratitude.
   - The life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus are all about gratitude.
   - Jesus embodied the psalms in his spiritual practices.
   - The Cross was his great act of praise and gratitude to the Father.
2. Some thoughts and reflections on the psalms that express gratitude.
   - Psalm 34: "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord."
   - Psalm 138 & Psalm 118: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his love endures forever!”
   - Psalm 136: “Our God is good, give thanks, for his loving kindness endures for ever.”
   - Psalm 136:23: “It is he who remembered us in our lowest state, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

King David Playing the Zither by Andrea Cesti (17th Century)
3. Reasons for praise and gratitude, reasons for praying.
   - Prayer of Gratitude: “God, I do not feel like giving thanks and praise, but I embrace this moment of darkness and pain as an opportunity to reach out to you and to allow you to reach out to me. I do not feel grateful, but in faith I choose to make an act of gratitude.”

4. Faith and hope as the basis for gratitude and for all prayer

5. Cultivating gratitude
   - Be quick to praise and slow to condemn.
   - Begin with what comes naturally.
   - Give thanks for the good and the beautiful.
   - Say, “Thanks be to God.”
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. The Rosary of Gratitude: The rosary is an ancient form of prayer that is actually a mantra. The purpose is not to think about anything but to go to a deeper level of consciousness, the place where God speaks to the heart. Pray the rosary and go to that deep place. At the end of each decade, spend some time giving thanks and concluding it with the words of praise, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”

2. The Stations of Gratitude: For each station of the cross, imagine in your mind what Jesus experienced. Try to make the event yours in the present moment. Then spend a few minutes thinking of God’s love for you and say “thank you” for the gift of love. Conclude these moments of gratitude by asking the Lord how you might bring this gift to those whom you will meet today.

3. Choose one psalm each day this week and pray it slowly, feasting on every word.
Topic 4: Being Grateful in the Present Moment

Overview

The greatest obstacle for developing the art of the gratitude is the fact that we often live anywhere except in the present moment. We become prisoners to the guilt and mistakes of the past and our fears and anxieties about the future. God is the one who is “I AM”, the one who pitches his tent in the present moment. The most important thing we can do to cultivate the prayer of gratitude is to live in the present moment. This session will offer ideas on how we might do this.

Outline

1. The challenge of living in the present moment in a fast-moving culture.
2. The discipline of living in the present moment
   - “All negativity is resistance. . . . Watch any plant or animal and let it teach you acceptance of what is, surrender to the Now. . . . Whenever you feel negativity arising within you, whether caused by an external factor, a thought, or even nothing in particular that you are aware of, look on it as a voice saying ‘Attention. Here and Now. Wake up. . . . Get out of your mind. Be present.’” (Eckhart Tolle, The Power of Now)
3. Prayer as focusing
4. Jean-Pierre de Caussade’s teachings about abandonment to divine providence
   - “Faith sees that Jesus Christ lives in everything and works through all history to the end of time. . . . It is faith that interprets God for us. Without its light we should not even know that God is speaking. . . . Faith transforms the earth into paradise. . . . To be satisfied with the present moment is to relish and adore the divine will moving through all we have to do and suffer as events crowd in upon us. . . . Mary sees the Apostles flee, but she herself remains faithfully at the foot of the cross. . . . There is no peace more wonderful than the peace we enjoy when faith shows us God in all created things. . . . There is never one moment in which I cannot show you how to find whatever you can desire. There present moment is always overflowing with immeasurable riches. . . . When the will of God is made known to us and we in turn make it plain that we are only too glad to abandon ourselves to it, we shall be given most powerful help. We shall then know the joy of God’s arrival within us. . . . So every moment of our lives can be a kind of communion with God’s love.” (Jean-Pierre de Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence)
5. Mary as a model for living in the present moment (Stabat Mater, Mary Stood)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Take an hour at work is to live in the present moment. Make an effort to pay attention to the moment and to stay there.

2. Experience the beauty of your world through one of your senses (sight, sound, touch or smell). Sit in the backyard or take a walk in a park and make a mental list of everything that you experience through that one sense. Give thanks for the sounds of the birds, the coolness of the grass, or the tiny flowers growing between the rocks. You can do this for a week and share with a friend, focusing on a different sense each day.

3. Michel Quoist wrote, “We are not God. We are simply the image of God and our task is gradually to discover that image and set it free.” Sit in a comfortable chair, feet flat on the floor, hands folded, and eyes closed. Just remain this way for twenty minutes and experience God’s image in you.
Topic 5: Rejoice Always!

Overview

The Pauline triad, “joy, prayer, and thanksgiving” (Thessalonians 5:16-18), is a masterpiece on the relationship of these three aspects of prayer. The goal is to develop all three so that they complement each other. It is the Spirit who brings all three into our lives and thus makes “our imperfect prayer perfect.” Prayer will mean different things to us at different times in our lives. This session will point out that authentic joy is the sure sign that God is at work in our lives; it is the obvious manifestation of the prayer of thanksgiving.

Outline

2. Paul recognizes his need for God and that his strength comes from God alone.
3. What is joy in the writings of St. Paul?
4. What does thanks mean in the Pauline corpus?
5. How does St. Paul define prayer?
6. The need for a new definition of prayer based on the letters of St. Paul.

Saint Paul by Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1621)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses. Give thanks to God for both.

2. You are responsible for your own happiness. Try to live this week with the attitude of the glass half full, rather than half empty.

3. We should bring joy wherever we go, not whenever we go. Make an effort to bring a positive energy, a joyful spirit into your workplace, community and home.
Topic 6: Human and Holy

Overview

This topic will deal with the quest for holiness. So often we view holiness as being otherworldly, as somehow being distant and removed for the ordinariness of human existence. Contemplation invites us to be who we are in our prayer. It is the place where our masks come off and we can just be. In doing this we discover what it means to be truly human, to be truly alive. As St. Irenaeus wrote in the second century, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God.”

Outline

1. Recapturing our humanity
2. The two halves of life
3. Aging as a contemplative journey
   - “We have a wonderful life. Everyday is a good one. She is the most grateful, happy person that you’ll ever meet. When we take a ride in the car, spontaneously from her lips comes, “This is the day the Lord has made. Oh, what a beautiful day. Thank you God.” (Michael Leach, “The Color of Gratitude”)
4. The Doctrine of the Three Ways
   - Purgative: letting go of sinfulness
   - Illuminative: growing in virtue
   - Unitive: union with God
5. Thomas Merton and contemplation
   - “Contemplation forces a person below the surface comforts of basic narcissism to face the hell that exists because of the self’s lived lie. God reveals himself to the contemplative only when he has embraced the wilderness of the human spirit. The inner desert in which he comes face to face with his own nothingness, sinfulness, ignorance, infidelity, helplessness and need for God.”
   - “The world of today is sorely tempted to fall into atheism, into the denial of this God who can be grasped on its own level. Some Christians, even, moved by the desire to share the condition of their fellow men in the fullest possible way, are yielding to this outlook when they proclaim the need of a certain level of unbelief as the necessary basis for any fully human sincerity.”
6. The Second Vatican Council and its vision for holiness
   - *Lumen Gentium*: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964)
   - The Universal Call to Holiness

*The Apostles on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)*
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. What is holiness?

2. Describe a holy person. What does he/she look like? How does he/she act?

3. What is your image of what it means to be a saint? Do you think you could be a saint?
Topic 7: The Wisdom of Sabbath

Overview

Wisdom is a gift received. Many people choose not to embrace this gift. These people might be intelligent, knowing facts but never making the connection between the details. Wise people see deeper and live life on another level. This session will propose that gratitude follows wisdom. A person who is truly wise recognizes that all is gift. The Sabbath is the context in which wisdom is offered and gratitude abounds.

Outline

1. Wisdom and Gratitude
2. 1 Kings 3
   - The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, because that was the most renowned high place. Upon its altar Solomon offered a thousand holocausts. In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night. God said, “Ask something of me and I will give it to you.”
   - Solomon answered: “You have shown great favor to your servant, my father David, because he behaved faithfully toward you, with justice and an upright heart; and you have continued this great favor toward him, even today, seating a son of his on his throne. O LORD, my God, you have made me, your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong. For who is able to govern this vast people of yours?”

3. The invitation to receive wisdom, a gift of the Spirit
4. Surprise and wonder
5. Leisure and the view of the human person
6. The elements for celebration
   - Affirming the present condition
- Remembering
- Expecting more to come

7. The Sabbath as defining our humanity and forming an alternative to the dominant culture
8. The elements of the Sabbath
9. Cultivating a Sabbath rhythm that fosters grateful living
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Read the story of Solomon in 1 Kings 3. Reflect on the reading and pray for the gift of wisdom.

2. Take a Sabbath day, a festival with no thoughts of work.

3. Take a technology break: one day with no cell phone, email, text, tweets, Facebook, etc.
Topic 8: Gratitude on the Cross

Overview

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* writes about cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace is seeking to be a disciple with the cross. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer, cheap gratitude is gratitude without the cross. A superficial gratitude is one that gives thanks when all is going well. It is natural to do this. True gratitude gives thanks in all things, even when things are not going well. This gratitude does not come from the voice of the ego that seeks to control and be as God, but rather comes from the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Outline

1. A holy longing: getting in touch with the emptiness within
2. A spirituality of darkness
3. Saints who show us the way
   - The Carmelite mystics (John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux)
   - Mother Teresa of Calcutta: *Come Be My Light* (2007)
4. Navigating a dark night
5. The Book of Job and the mystery of God
   - Job 42:2-6: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.”
6. The centrality of the cross in the Christian life
7. Jesus as the expression of God’s gratitude and his embrace of the cross

*Job* by Leon Bonnat (1860)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Reflect on the dark moments you have had on your life journey. How did you respond to those moments?

2. Read the book of Job. What is God’s answer to suffering and pain in our lives?

3. Make a list of those who have hurt you in some way. Pray for them and ask God to bless them.
Topic 9: Practicing Gratitude

Overview

Gratitude is an art and like any art form it takes a lot of practice for it to begin to come naturally into your everyday life. The Capuchin lay brother, Felix of Cantalice, was called “Brother Deo Gratias” because his daily and constant mantra was “Thanks be to God.” It just flowed out of him at every moment. This session will reflect on the fruits of grateful living and the practices that we might use to develop that will make “Deo Gratias” a part of our daily vocabulary.

Outline

1. The practice of deep listening
2. Letting go of negative thinking and opening our eyes to beauty
3. The Examen of St. Ignatius of Loyola, adapted by Dorothy Day
   - Thank God for favors
   - Beg for light
   - Survey your day or where you are at in the day at a particular moment
   - Repent for any wrongs or negativity
   - Resolve: Ask for God’s help to do better
4. Obstacles to Gratitude: the many gods we worship
5. Discernment
6. Finding your name in grace and becoming your true self

St. Ignatius of Loyola by Peter Paul Reubens
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Say, “Thanks be to God” in your mind and, when appropriate, on your lips as often as you think of it today.

2. Listen attentively to everyone you meet today. Be slow to speak and be generous in listening.

3. God has a name for you given from the beginning of time. Spend some time praying today and try to discover the name God has chosen for you (Hint: Notice what moves you; what you desire; what excites you—these are key indicators of the way God has made you and the way He calls you to live and be in the world).
Topic 10:  
Forgiveness: Wings to Gratitude

Overview

Forgiveness opens the door of our hearts to gratitude. The biggest obstacle there is to becoming more grateful, peaceful and happy human beings is our inability or refusal to forgive others. Christians are held to the highest standard of forgiveness. Two thirds of the gospel is all about forgiveness. Practicing this topic will be the most challenging thing that we need to do if we are to become truly grateful.

Outline

1. We are wounded healers. We don’t become healers until we are willing to embrace our wounds and to receive the healing that we need. Letting go of hurts is not easy.

2. What forgiveness is not
   - Forgetting
   - Condoning
   - Absolving
   - For the offender
   - Only an act of will
   - A loss of identity
   - A release from obligations

3. What forgiveness is
   - A form of realism
   - Giving up revenge
   - Self-awareness
   - True freedom

4. Accepting God’s forgiveness for our sins and failings

5. Extending to others what God has given to us
   - “Father, into you hands I commend my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)
6. Letting go of resentments
7. Forgiveness does not require forgetting
8. What constitutes forgiveness
   - Passive to the voice of the ego, active to the voice of the Holy Spirit

*The Adoration of the Holy Trinity* (detail, Landauer Altar)
by Albrecht Durer (1511)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Pray for those who have hurt you and pray for the grace to forgive them.

2. Make amends to those you have hurt.

3. As you experience the joy and relief that forgiveness brings, give thanks and praise to God.
Topic 11: Grateful Saints

Overview

St. Theresa of Avila once said, “God spare me from sad and sour saints.” Many saints in the Christian tradition are models for the practice of gratitude. If true holiness makes us more human, then it also makes us more grateful and joyful. As a little boy once remarked while looking at the saints depicted in stained glass, he exclaimed, “Saints are those who let the light come through.” The light that comes through the saints is a warm light, one that is inviting, one that exudes joy and gratitude.

Outline

1. The history of the Christian understanding of what makes a saint, from the early centuries up to the Second Vatican Council
   - Universal Call to Holiness (Lumen gentium, V)
   - “Everyday mysticism” (Karl Rahner)
   - The Holy Saturday Context
2. A movement away from saints as being distant from us towards the saints as companions on the journey
3. Mary: A first-century Jewish woman of faith
   - The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55): “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”
4. The Annunciation
5. St. Francis of Assisi and the Canticle of the Creatures
   - Moon: God the Father
   - Sun: God the Son
   - Wind/Fire/Water: Holy Spirit
6. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius grounded in gratitude

- Week 1: The First Principle and Foundation
  - Everything is created by God
  - Our sinfulness ( ingratitude )
  - Christ the King
- Week 2: The Life of Christ (gratefulness)
- Week 3: God’s Love, the Cross, Jesus’ Death
- Week 4: Christ’s Resurrection

*The Vision of Saint Francis* by Vincenzo Carducci (1631)
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Who are your favorite saints? Do you notice any pattern in the saints to whom you are drawn?

2. Pray Mary’s Magnificat and pray it as a song of gratitude.

Topic 12: Homecoming

Overview

St. Augustine wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” The restlessness that we all experience can only be fully satisfied by God and God alone. As we move closely to the heart of God on our journey, the more grateful we will be. The place that we call heaven is a place where gratitude reigns supreme. It is the place where are ultimate longings are satisfied, where we are at peace and where we find that happiness that we so desperately sought in this life.

Outline

1. Physical homelessness and spiritually homelessness
2. *Le Pointe Verge*
   - Discovering that place of purity within
   - The spark of the Divine in the center of our being
3. Houses and homes
   - Becoming at home in our world and in our own skin
   - Home: place of special permanence and hospitality
4. The place of the heart as the center for hospitality, where we welcome God however God chooses to knock on our doors.
5. Meister Eckhart: Creation-centered spirituality
   - *Via Positiva*
   - *Via Negativa*
   - *Via Creativa*
   - *Via Transformativa*
6. Original blessing
7. The two halves of life

Meister Eckhart
Developing the Art of Gratitude

1. Peek into heaven. What do you see going on there? Start making it happen now.

2. Pay attention to the physically homeless. What do they teach you about your spiritual homelessness?

3. God often comes to us in the interruptions of our lives. Make room today for some interruptions.
Suggested Readings


