Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

11.28.08: Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow!

It should come as no surprise that I wish to reflect upon giving thanks in this week’s reflection (for the Canadians in the crowd, yesterday was Thanksgiving in America).

The act of giving thanks is not just something that addresses the obligations of justice. It is best expressed and most profoundly felt in those situations where the debt we owe is so great that there is little that we can do to repay it. This is most keenly felt by the Christian. We are faced with an embarrassment of riches which extend from the very gift of creation, through to our own existence, the salvific act and the consequent possibility of union with God in the next life. These gifts are so great that they fuel not only all that we do as a people redeemed, but also the crushing realization of the inevitable inadequacy of our response. And yet, there is hope for appropriate actions on our part. In this, we take our lead, as we do in the whole of our prayer life, from the Holy Spirit as He teaches us to pray through the psalms. Psalm 116 readily comes to mind:

_I love the Lord for he has heard the cry of my appeal; for he turned his ear to me in the day when I called him. They surrounded me, the snares of death, with the anguish of the tomb; they caught me, sorrow and distress, I called on the Lord’s name. O Lord my God, deliver me! How gracious is the Lord, and just; our God has compassion. The Lord protects the simple hearts; I was helpless so he saved me. Turn back, my soul, to your rest for the Lord has been good; he has kept my soul from death, my eyes from tears and my feet from stumbling. I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living. I trusted, even when I said: “I am sorely afflicted,” and when I said in my alarm: “No man can be trusted.” How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I will raise; I will call on the Lord’s name. My vows to the Lord I will fulfill before all his people. O precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful. Your servant, Lord, your servant am I; you have loosened my bonds. A thanksgiving sacrifice I make; I will call on the Lord’s name. My vows to the Lord I will fulfill before all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem._

It is quite clear that the gift given far exceeds any proportional response on our part. For how can we repay the One who has preserved our lives from decay, despair and death? And yet, there pours forth from the psalmist a spirit of great joy, gratitude and praise. We have seen this in our weekly reflections, particularly in the love, wonder and honor that we exhibit before our Creator, manifested in the particular ways by which we draw closer to Him through the four pillars of discernment. These pillars could be described as four very practical ways by which we seek to bring all that we are into the service of, and conformity with, that very Being Who has saved us. However, there is something even greater to be done here than the actions that flow from these four pillars as we make our return to the Lord. Please do not mistake me on this point. I do not mean to denigrate the gifts that we offer to the Lord in all that we do as a community within the Center for Discernment. Nor do I wish to lessen the beauty of our actions in and for the Lord as these have and continue to flow from our own personal prayer. I mean, rather, to put into relief what it is that we bring and how it is that we are to bring it. In this, we take our lead not only from the psalmist above, but most especially from the widow who gave not from her surplus but from her need (Mark 12: 41-44).

It is clear to anyone that the donation she makes is not the issue, but rather the disposition of the donor herself. One, then, ought not to concentrate primarily upon the fact that what she gave came from her need, but rather should dwell upon what stands behind her act, that which makes it possible in the first place and most
especially worthy of the notice and praise of Christ. When one approaches the widow’s mite in this way, it is sometimes the case that we might consider the widow’s actions as irresponsible, that in giving what is clearly required for her health and well-being, she dishonors the very gift that was given to her by God, namely her life and bodily condition, not to mention all the things of her mind and spirit that depend upon the proper care of her person. This sort of objection is quite commonly lodged against the saints and those who are holy, specifically as they practice act of asceticism, such as abstaining from alcohol, fasting from food, embracing celibacy, and other such practices. The idea is that when we are faced with acts of heroic virtue, we, both the religious and non-religious, experience a disquietude in their presence, a vague discomfort before the witness that they offer.

We understand that, as Christians, we are called to be honorable stewards of the gifts that have been given to us. We are called to make our way in the world, and not to burden unnecessarily our culture, families, friends, and even the environment. Finally, we are called to contribute to the preservation of all these things, giving as we have received so that the greatness of these things might be preserved both for us and for future generations to come. However, as we take on and are formed by the prayer of the psalmist and the actions of the widow, our lives begin to change in such a way that we feel impelled to engage in acts beyond those rooted in prudence, justice, courage and fortitude. We seek to engage in acts of faith, hope and charity, most especially those rooted in the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows and the actions to which they give rise, appear to those outside the Faith to be foolish, and even inhuman, detrimental, in their view, to the development and full flowering of our humanity. They consider such acts as contrary to the very gift of God Himself, an abuse of the wonders, joys and pleasures that our humanity offers, that are to be grasped and enjoyed to the full. In this spirit, such people excuse the ascetic practices of the saints by saying, for example, that they manifest underlying psychological problems, that these problems were dealt with at that time under the umbrella of their faith, and that, consequently, these practices, although necessary for them at that time, are not required of us today. ¹ They look upon the begging orders (such as the Dominicans and Franciscans) as somewhat irresponsible as their vocation places unnecessary financial burdens upon the people that they serve, people who suffer greatly already in these ways and do not need the extra burdens that their vows impose upon them. Finally, they consider people who remains celibate, especially the young who are not associated directly with a religious community, as somehow acting contrary to their humanity, as being somehow less of the man or woman they could be if only they were to embrace the natural pleasures of their humanity, and thus grow into the full mature man or women that God intended them to be.

The doubt and confusion that such views generate in us can only be dispelled by our imitation of both the psalmist and the widow. As we grow in our recognition of God’s gifts to us, as we plumb the depths of our debt to Him, and finally as we realize that there is no way that we could ever make good the demands of justice, we are led by the Holy Spirit to do the only thing possible to us, namely, to lift up our arms, our voices, our minds, and our hearts in the praise of God, in thanksgiving for all that He has done for us, and to make of our lives the

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¹ They often argue that the value of these ascetic practices have been emptied by the advances made in the psychological and medical sciences, specifically in the understanding of the nature of mental illness, and its treatment through cognitive based therapies and pharmacological means. While some saints and the holy may have suffered from such disorders, the argument is meant to address their behavior universally, that is, as it considers their ascetic practices as nothing more than the active manifestation of psychologically aberrant states.
very donation that God makes of His to the whole world. In this is found the root of true celebration, of the holiday, and of the liturgy itself. In our gratitude is found the soil in which the virtues of faith, hope and charity can be received, which then blossom first into the activities described in the reflections concerning the four pillars of our discernment, and then finally into the actions of asceticism specific to the Christian: the chastity that we are called to practice with respect to all worldly goods and pleasures, the obedience that we are called to exhibit with respect to those under whom we have placed ourselves (be they person, dogma, creed, or Church) in heart, mind and person, and finally, the poverty that we are called to embrace with respect to the material and immaterial wealth with which we have been gifted and which we pour out to one and all without reserve in the same way that we ourselves received them in the first place. Thus, the widow’s gift of her two copper coins is lauded by Christ as she offers an example of one who, being so deeply rooted in her faith, hope and love of God, practices actions contrary to the values of this world, but which make perfect sense to those who see with the eyes of faith, understanding that such an action reveals the image and likeness of God in her, a being ready as love and in love to overflow (in imitation of the very act of Creation and into all that she makes, does, feels and thinks) the very goodness that she is and has received and this throughout the entirety of her life. This is a model worthy of imitation and in which we even see the foreshadowing of Christ’s own donation of His life for all upon the Cross. It is in this light, then, that the ascetic practices of the chaste, the virgin, the abstemious, and the obedient become reasonable, virtuous, holy and worthy of imitation. These are not mentally disturbed acts but are justly seen as loving and wondrous incarnations of the Doxology “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow."2

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2 One might want to consider the Doxology as it is sung with such vim and vigor by the children of Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* in its second to last chapter. One might also consider the hymn of praise at the completion of C. S. Lewis’s *Perelandra*, the second book in his very under-rated science fiction trilogy.