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Gratitude as a Daily Practice

by Steven Alexander, Ph.D.

One may define gratitude as “the quality of being thankful.” Alternatively, we can think of it as an attitude, emotion, personal trait, or behavioral practice.

However it is conceived, the quality of being grateful is a foundational component of daily social exchange and can carry deep meaning both on interpersonal and intrapersonal levels.

Perhaps not coincidentally, when learning a new language, “thanks” is often one of the first words taught and acquired. Expressing thanks is seen as a universal sign of acknowledgment, respect, and humility, and it transcends culture and time. The very act conveys a caring for the other person

Giving thanks ... enhances feelings of optimism and well-being in general.

in a connected relationship. When transacted genuinely, it solidifies meaning that something of value and worth has transpired. The act and reverberations leave both the person offering the gratitude and the person receiving it feeling better in general, as well as better about self and others.

This concept of gratitude is a main tenet of the Catholic faith and even

forms the elemental basis of saying grace before a meal.

It is also an integral purpose of Mass and prayer in general. Indeed, “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Priests and religious are steeped in the importance of gratitude and thankfulness, not only in personal and vocational formation but also in daily practice.

The concept of gratitude also holds a preeminent place within the twelve-step principles and groups. It is not an uncommon occurrence for someone in an AA meeting to introduce him or herself as a “grateful alcoholic.”

This simple yet powerful moniker implies two related reckonings of thankfulness. First, that the individual accepts the struggles with alcohol she has encountered along the way as a part of her whole human cloth. Second, that she is happy with life as it is now, in the current moment.

The Key to Contentment

Practicing gratitude can be an integral part of knowing and maintaining real contentment. During tough times when we find life a struggle, being grateful for one’s whole circumstance and making a ritual out of gratitude may seem especially counterintuitive, yet it can provide an effective vehicle through those emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Despite this cognitive understand-

ing regarding the conceptual importance of gratitude, practical offerings of gratitude can sometimes become more rote or a less genuinely felt part of our daily, lived experiences. When this happens we can accidentally diminish a crucial source of spiritual connection and personal happiness.

Psychological research supports what we already know on a personal, institutional, and even national (Thanksgiving Day) level: Giving thanks is a vital way to connect to something larger than ourselves and enhances feelings of optimism and well-being in general.

Stated differently, our mental health can actively be improved through purposeful practices of gratitude.

Gratitude’s Impact on Well-Being

Positive psychology approaches scientific theory and inquiry from the perspective of how best to help individuals experience greater fulfillment in life. Various studies have indicated correlations between intentionally practicing thankfulness and an increased sense of personal happiness, decreased anxiety and depression, more restful sleep, and beneficial changes in brain chemistry.

In “Counting Blessings Versus Burdens,” by Emmons and McCullough (2003)¹, the researchers conducted three studies on whether practicing gratitude

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Case Study Father Tom

by Steven Alexander, Ph.D.

Father Tom requested to come to treatment. Nine months earlier his mother had died, leaving him with no direct family. At the time, he immediately felt a significant decline in his mood, almost like he had fallen off a cliff. He told himself this was normal grief, but instead, “normal” just seemed to worsen with time.

He grew concerned when he started lashing out at parishioners and co-workers over even trivial matters, which was highly unusual for him. Fr. Tom took these concerns to confession and tried harder to contain his emotions. This helped somewhat, but he was still sleeping poorly, struggling to concentrate, and felt unmotivated in both ministry and life in general.

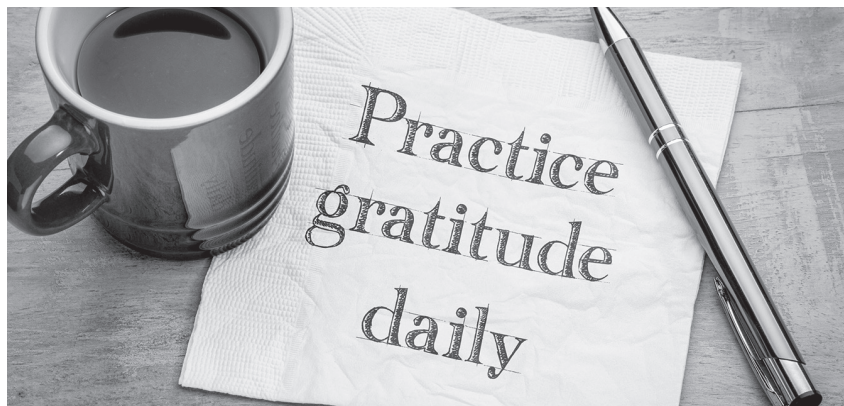
Additionally, Fr. Tom realized he had progressively withdrawn from friends ever since his mother’s death.

“Practice daily gratitude, in any way that works for you, and you’ll feel more and more grateful every day!”

He felt isolated and sad, yet he didn’t have the energy or even desire to reach out to anyone.

Several friends and one close co-worker tried expressing their growing worries about him. He rebuffed them, however, by attributing his problems to stress from his heavy workload.

One day, sitting alone in his office, he started to cry uncontrollably. That was the last straw. He realized he needed to do something. He broached the issue with his vicar for clergy and



felt some relief for the first time in a long while when the vicar told him the diocese would support an evaluation at Saint Luke Institute.

Glimmer of Hope

By the end of the week-long, multidisciplinary evaluation (spiritual, physical, and psychological), Fr. Tom already felt a glimmer of hope, given how understanding everyone on the evaluation team seemed to be about his situation.

The experts at Saint Luke diagnosed him with anxiety and depression. It proved a tremendous relief to be offered placement in the six-month inpatient treatment track. The Institute has other programs that offer a shorter duration and different focus, but the team, diocese, and Father all agreed he would most benefit from this program and approach.

Within the first two months of treatment, Fr. Tom’s mood began to shift. At first, the changes were subtle but nonetheless noticeable to him. Fr. Tom attributed the positive changes to talking about his grief over his mother’s death, which had tipped him into depression. He also knew taking an antidepressant

medication provided him the necessary cushion to tackle this emotional work, which he had avoided for nine months.

His mood really began to lift, however, after his primary therapist asked him what made him feel gratitude.

Recognizing Gratitude

Fr. Tom initially struggled to answer this seemingly simple question. His therapist encouraged him to take several days to think, feel, and pray about it and then share what might come to him.

Over the next several days, Fr. Tom generated a short but personally meaningful list of reasons for gratitude in his life. First during individual therapy and then in groups, he started focusing on his overwhelming gratitude for his mother, who had raised him on her own after his father’s death when he was a young child.

Listing more and more things about her goodness and loving qualities and sharing his joys of remembrance with others helped him grieve differently than he had previously done. He no longer focused only on the deep sadness

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Father Tom, *continued*

he felt at her passing (which of course is also a necessary part of acknowledging the depth of grief). Rather, he could now tap into a genuine appreciation of how much God had blessed him to have given her as his mother.

It pleased Fr. Tom to notice he also possessed a good number of the same positive qualities he had listed as part of his gratitude about her. This caused him to feel even closer to his mother and to feel grateful for those qualities in himself on an experiential level.

Connecting to God in Gratitude

Fr. Tom began to broaden his gratitude practice, listing friends he wanted to reconnect with in anticipation of returning home. He even phoned a few of them to directly share how thankful he felt to have them in his life. Finally, he redeveloped a more meaningful connection to God, including his thankfulness that this relationship had drawn him to the priesthood in the first place.

By the time Fr. Tom left Saint Luke Institute, he had developed a very intentional, daily gratitude practice that bookended the day, beginning in the

morning by acknowledging his mother's life and her gift of life to him and ending every evening with a list of the day's gratitude, both large and small.

Father returned to ministry with renewed zeal, and he gave this recommendation to all parishioners who seemed receptive: "Practice daily gratitude, in any way that works for you, and you'll feel more and more grateful every day!"

For confidentiality reasons, names, identifying data and other details of treatment have been altered.

Gratitude, *continued from page 1*

had an impact on well-being.

Researchers randomly assigned participants to groups that were asked to either focus on gratitude or on neutral or distressing events. For all three studies, the gratitude-outlook groups were reported to exhibit heightened well-being across a significant number of outcome measures relative to comparison groups, with "positive effect" or happiness appearing to be the most robust effect. Researchers concluded such results suggest both emotional and interpersonal benefits accruing from a "conscious focus on blessings."

Similar studies have employed journaling, prayer, meditation, or social connection (i.e., communicating one's gratitude directly to family or friends) as the means of tapping into this all too often overlooked—or perhaps taken for granted—power we can all manifest.

More Necessary Now Than Ever

As extreme political strife and global un-

certainty only add to an already stressful existence, it may be a particularly good time for a self-care challenge.

Find a simple but effective-for-you way(s) of being, saying, and noticing what and for whom you are thankful. Be creative, but don't forget to practice. Just like physical muscles, our gratitude muscles can atrophy when not stretched.

Perhaps just as importantly, remember also to notice and appreciate your own gifts. Realistic, positive self-appraisal helps bolster self-esteem, which in turn makes it that much easier to appreciate others. And, if all else fails, remember the gratitude you undoubtedly felt and shared with the world a few

months ago when 13 trapped souls were rescued from a cave in Thailand.

After all, we can often say gratitude is primarily about taking perspective.

Steven Alexander, Ph.D., is a therapist with the Halfway House program at Saint Luke Institute.

¹Emmons, R.A., McCullough, M.E. (2003). "Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84 (2), 377-389.

Gratitude tips

- Practice: Gratitude "muscles" can atrophy if not used
- Notice what and for whom you are grateful, including your own gifts
- Find simple ways to be thankful
- Remember, gratitude is primarily about taking perspective

Richmond Bishop Knestout Honored at Saint Luke Benefit

Richmond Bishop Barry C. Knestout was honored with the Saint Luke Award during a benefit held Oct. 22 at the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington, DC.

In presenting the award, Saint Luke Board Chairman David Brown called Bishop Knestout “a man of integrity, kindness and humility who demonstrates charity to others.”

“The Church is richer because of Bishop Knestout’s love for Christ and for Christ’s people. He has supported religious life, encouraged vocations and walked the path to healing with many

priests,” Brown said. “...Whoever goes to him in pain, in need of healing, in need of understanding, knows he or she will encounter a gentle father, kind brother and wise bishop who will listen, pray, and do what is right and just.”

The award is given annually during the Saint Luke Institute Annual Benefit, which raises awareness and funds to provide education and treatment for men and women religious, and priests, in financial need.



Most Rev. Barry C. Knestout with Saint Luke President, Rev. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., Psy.D., Mary and David Brown, and Most Rev. Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio

Screening applicants for priesthood

Early psychological screening is an important first step toward healthy clergy and religious. The Saint Luke Candidate Assessment Program has been in place for over 20 years, offers three-person assessment teams, and is available at our centers in Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. Saint Luke staff also work with vocation directors and seminaries to help ensure healthy human formation. Learn more at www.sli.org/services/candidate.

Support our ministry

A contribution to Saint Luke Institute in honor of a priest or religious is a wonderful Christmas present. Donate online at www.sli.org.

For information about including Saint Luke Institute in your estate plan, please contact Gail Battle at 301-422-5404 or gailb@sli.org.

Caritas Counseling - Baltimore Partnership

Priests of the Archdiocese of Baltimore may now receive services through Caritas Counseling Center, Saint Luke’s Maryland-based outpatient program, confidentially and at no cost to the priest. The Archdiocese is offering this benefit as a way to support healthy life and ministry for its clergy. Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori recently said, “Thanks so much for Caritas, which does a wonderful, wonderful service for the priests of my archdiocese. We have a program now for any priest who feels he needs help.”

Saint Luke Institute also is partnering with dioceses and religious institutes to provide ongoing formation. In addition to group subscriptions to SLIconnect.org and in-person workshops, Saint Luke Institute provides specially tailored programs, on topics chosen by a diocese, that combine in-person training with webinars.



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