

GRACED GRATITUDE

Charles M. Shelton

PEOPLE ALWAYS PRAISE GRATITUDE. Consider what some noted writers have said: 'Gratitude is the moral memory of mankind' (George Simmel); or 'Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy' (Jacques Maritain). Equally striking are the comments on ingratitude: 'Ingratitude . . . is the essence of vileness' (Immanuel Kant) and 'Ingratitude . . . is an abomination' (Seneca).¹ Ignatius' denunciation is particularly vehement:

In His divine goodness, I consider (although others may think differently) ingratitude among the most abominable of all imaginable evils and sins in the eyes of our Creator and Lord and of the creatures made open for the divine glory which is His. For it is the disregard of the benefits, graces, and gifts that we have received; it is the cause, principle and origin of all evils and sins.

'On the contrary', Ignatius continues, 'awareness and gratitude of the benefits and gifts received—how much it is to be loved and esteemed!'² This article explores, both from a philosophical and from a psychological point of view, the concept of gratitude, particularly as we find it in the Ignatian Exercises. It also brings out the links between gratitude and the theological virtue of love. And lastly, it sets forth a kind of irony in gratitude, an irony which might even apply to the Lord's mission.

There are at least two reasons why it is difficult for a psychologist to write about gratitude and spirituality. Firstly, psychologists, like other scientists, can fall victim to what we might term the *empirical*

¹ For a compendium including these and other quotations, see Robert A. Emmons and Charles M. Shelton, 'Gratitude and the Science of Positive Psychology', in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, edited by C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 463.

² Ignatius to Simão Rodrigues, 18 March 1542, MHSJ EI 1, pp. 192-196, here p. 192. An English version is given in *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), p. 55. The reference is taken from the beginning of Gerald M. Fagin, 'Stirred to Profound Gratitude', *Review for Religious*, 54 (1995), pp. 237-252.

fallacy. They dismiss the humanities in general, and theology or spirituality in particular, because the methods these disciplines use are not statistically rigorous. What theologians say is at worst quite illegitimate, at best interesting but incomplete. Admittedly, extreme versions of such thinking are no longer fashionable. For some of the intriguing concepts used in spirituality, such as spiritual well-being and spiritual experiences, measurement tools have been proposed.³ One psychologist has even put forward the concept of 'spiritual intelligence'.⁴ Nevertheless, many of the ideas central to Christian spirituality are not empirically measurable. No statistical method will clarify what is going on when a person enters the 'dark night of the soul', or embarks on a spiritual journey; nor will it ever explain what is meant by depths of gratitude.

Secondly, spiritual writers can easily over-idealise gratitude. One manifestation of such *idealisation* might be described as pollyannism. Gratitude is so attractive and popular that critical scrutiny seems out of place. Another manifestation is an inflexible rigour: the idealisation of gratitude leads writers into imperatives that fail to recognise other human realities which might well be morally or spiritually relevant, such as personal weakness or stress.

What is Gratitude?

Few people could give a definition of weather, even though they could easily describe a rainy, windy, or cloudy day. Similarly, few people can define an emotion, and there is no consensus on the topic among philosophers and psychologists who address the topic professionally. Yet everyone knows what a grateful heart is.

I surveyed more than a hundred people, investigating what happened when they experienced gratitude. I asked them questions like: 'what is gratitude?', 'how would you describe a personal experience of gratitude?', 'what did your experience of gratitude lead to?' The individuals I spoke with ranged in age from 18 to 75, and they all described rich, inspiring experiences of gratitude. The fact that the questions were open-ended removed any temptation to use simplistic

³ See *Measures of Religiosity*, edited by Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999).

⁴ Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns* (New York: Guildford Press, 1999).

*Gift better than himself God doth not know;
Gift better than his God no man can see.
This gift doth here the giver given bestow;
Gift to this gift let each receiver be.
God is my gift, himself he freely gave me;
God's gift am I, and none but God shall have me.*

Robert Southwell SJ (1562-1595)

categories of measurement; the request that the claims be illustrated from everyday life did at least something to counter any tendency towards idealisation—although it is worth noting that not one of them found the experience of gratitude in any way negative.

There seem to be three elements generally present in any experience of gratitude:

- someone offers a *gift*; the recipient may be under some obligation or duty, but the sense of gift goes somehow beyond this;
- the one who receives the gift interprets the giver's altruistic motives correctly;
- the gift triggers positive feelings in the one receiving, and often leads them, in their turn, to offer a further gift—either back to the giver or onward to some third party.

Gratitude seems thus to involve a permanent, self-renewing dynamic of gift and goodness. We might say that gratitude is the giving away of goodness.

Gratitude brings joy and contentment; it builds positive relationships of trust, and builds up the self-esteem of the one receiving the gift. It also encourages the recipient to pass the gift on. These effects fit nicely with what psychology has come to identify as a 'broad and build' theory of emotion. Positive emotions empower us to consider others' viewpoints; they expand our creativity, they reveal new avenues of hope, they foster self-awareness and extend our

sensitivity.⁵ These claims in the literature were well confirmed by how the people in my survey spoke about gratitude. Negative emotions, by contrast, draw us inward: they narrow our focus down to distressing problems and painful hurts. Feeling negatively leads us to be stuck, mired in tunnel vision. Gratitude is an energizing force: it draws us beyond a narcissistic focus on our own selves, and encourages us to become more and more selfless by continuing the dynamic of gift.

One response in the survey, from a middle-aged professional man, is typical:

One image I have for gratitude is that of a window, beyond which is a view—sometimes obscured—of loving-kindness practised by human beings I've known, sometimes taking me completely by surprise. Or better than a window: a full length glass door, beckoning me to pass through. It's not that I've got to repay anything—rather I need to engage in, contribute to, the practice of loving-kindness as unselfconsciously as I can.

He then described what it was like to pass through this 'glass door'. His developing gratitude challenged his first, negative impressions of reality, and thereby aroused his hitherto dormant moral vision. He ended by saying, 'I have been able to express my appreciation more, and to find opportunities for caring I previously would have overlooked'. As we dwell in reflective gratitude on what we have received, we turn outwards, and focus on ways to give back and to give on.

Some other points are worth noting at this stage. Firstly, the attention of the grateful person typically moves from the gift itself to the giver. If a friend helps us move some heavy furniture, we may begin by dwelling happily on how much easier the job has been, but our attention will soon shift, if we are truly grateful, from the favour done to the person of our friend.

Secondly, gratitude has different levels of depth. There is a vast difference between a common 'thank you' to someone holding open a door for us, and making a long journey or buying a carefully chosen

⁵ Barbara L. Fredrickson, 'Gratitude and Other Positive Emotions Broaden and Build', invited address at a symposium entitled 'Kindling the Science of Gratitude', sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation and held at Dallas in October 2000.

present to express gratitude to someone who has done us a great favour—a neighbour of our aged parents, for example, who has selflessly looked after them in their illnesses when our other commitments would not permit us to do so. Gratitude can range from a simple ‘thanks’ for a daily courtesy to a permanent, life-transforming attitude rooted in our hearts.

Thirdly, and more importantly, there are dark sides to gratitude. Consider examples like the following:

- Felix is grateful for winning at a slot-machine, when the payout is a matter of random luck.
- Sheila receives an award which she does not much care for. She says thank you, but knows all the time that her gesture is hollow.
- Jim is walking to the shops after a major snow storm, and waves to Peter, his friendly elderly neighbour, on the opposite side of the street. Without warning, Peter slips and falls. Jim goes to help—Peter is shaken, but assures Jim that he can make it home. Jim continues his journey, and is concerned about Peter—but is also secretly grateful that the fall was Peter’s, not his own.
- At a family gathering Eustace gives an expensive gift to his nephew as a way of embarrassing his sister and the boy’s mother, Jane, who could never afford such an expense. Jane feels trapped by the need to thank her brother and make her son do the same.
- Ron, a serial killer, is grateful to Mary for the road directions she has given him, since he now knows his escape route and can more easily escape detection.
- Hitler feels grateful toward his mother, perhaps the only person he truly ever loved.

The uncertainties raised by these cases do not occur because gratitude itself is somehow ambiguous or questionable. Rather, they arise because of some kind of mistake associated with the gratitude, or else because of some weakness in human nature. This point may be particularly important in the context of retreat direction. Many people, and sometimes their directors as well, misinterpret or overvalue

experiences of gratitude they may have during the time of retreat. Only later do they discover how short-lived these states can be: they do nothing to help the person negotiate the interpersonal tensions of their daily life; these remain troubling, even threatening. A first-fervour experience of gratitude might obscure sobering, difficult challenges that lie ahead. An emotionally disturbed retreatant uses the retreat to reinforce their denial of the situation, and unconsciously manufactures a sense of gratitude. But after the retreat, the same patterns continue: the person stirs up conflicts between their colleagues, while denying any responsibility for these actions that so effectively provoke their peers' anger. If we accept the principle that grace builds on or perfects nature, then we must recognise that the theological graces of gratitude, actively prayed for and perhaps in some sense received on retreat, will not change human 'nature'. They will not, of themselves, transform the limitations or impairments in human personalities.

We need also to note that the connections that can arise between gift, gratitude and envy. 'Gifts bring pride, and also envy, hatred, greed, jealousy. People are literally the creative product of the gifts they receive.'⁶ When we note the gifts possessed by another, for example an exemplary moral character, we might find our own sense of integrity threatened, and our feelings of gratitude for our own existence waning.

Gratitude and Love

The temptation towards the idealisation of gratitude is real, and we will always need to be cautious when faced with extravagant claims. Nevertheless, the central reality of gratitude is a positive one. I have already invoked the Catholic axiom about grace building on nature. I would now like to go further. I would like to suggest that our natural capacity for gratitude is the central point at which God's grace touches us, drawing us into the loving union which is the theological virtue of charity, and making that love fruitful in action.

In ways which are real—even if no statistical method will ever be able to measure them—grace reorientates human empathy. Jesus' message of the gift of the kingdom is a gift freely given. It is only

⁶ Karl E. Scheibe, *The Drama of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 209.

through gratitude for this gift that the transformation of heart and of action which the Gospel demands can take place. The boundless love of God, to which the New Testament bears witness, draws us into its dynamic by touching us with gratitude. No wonder, then, that gratitude is so central a category in Ignatian spirituality.

Gratitude in Ignatian Spirituality

There is no one Ignatian text that can serve as a definitive, comprehensive source for his spiritual teaching. Much could be said about Ignatius' view of gratitude from his letters. Hugo Rahner notes that these give the impression of a man filled with 'imperishable gratitude' if not 'helpless gratitude'.⁷ Here, however, we will concentrate on the *Spiritual Exercises*, and on the connections in Ignatius' vision between gratitude, insight, generosity, and the broadening of the mind and heart—connections also attested by the participants in my survey.

**Ignatius was
a man of
helpless gratitude**

The first point of the Examen invites us 'to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits received' (Exx 43.2). Formal psychology was unknown in Ignatius' age, and he was probably unaware of how important and significant this beginning is. The emphasis here on God's blessings given daily can lead us to a sense of security, warmth and appreciation, broadening our awareness of life's richness. On this basis we can constructively begin a process of examination, of redemptive self-scrutiny. If a healthy sense of gratitude is absent, reflection on one's own behaviour may well be threatening, a matter of anxiety, shame, or self-hatred. With a sense of gratitude, the Examen's consideration of who I have been is an expression of openness for discovering who I might become.

The notion of gratitude is also present in the exercises of the First Week proper. The second exercise concludes with a colloquy about mercy, and includes the significant phrase, 'giving thanks to God our Lord that He has given me life up to now' (Exx 61). The colloquy in the Hell meditation makes the point even more strongly. After considering three categories of people who are damned,

⁷ Quoted in Fagin, 'Stirred to Profound Gratitude' on p. 247 from the section on benefactresses in Hugo Rahner's editorial material for *Saint Ignatius Loyola Letters to Women*, translated by Kathleen Pond and S. A. H. Weetman (London: Nelson, 1960 [1956]), p. 170.

. . . I will give Him thanks that He has not let me fall into any of these categories, ending my life, and likewise for how up to now He has always had such great pity and mercy on me. . . . (Exx 71.3-4)

The contrasts between God's wisdom and my ignorance, between God's power and my weakness (Exx 59) are not meant to heighten our sense of guilt, but rather to deepen our gratitude: 'an exclamation of wonder, with increased feeling' (Exx 60.1—*crecido afecto*).

Research has shown that human beings are naturally more prone to negative than positive states. Joy and contentment generally last a few hours, while anxiety or sadness might linger for years, or indeed be the focus of a lifelong struggle.⁸ The First Week goes wrong if it is allowed to reinforce this tendency. Negative states can be successfully counteracted, given a conscious and focused effort. The daily Examen and the First Week can, when the note of gratitude is neglected, undermine our efforts. When we recognise the centrality of gratitude to the texts, the Ignatian First Week becomes a powerful instrument of both spiritual and psychological health. We are encouraged to imagine ourselves as grateful disciples, daily reminding ourselves of the love of a benefactor, intimately involved with our past, our present, and our future. We are drawn into the question: 'what might I do for Christ?' (Exx 53.2). Once again, we see the emotion of gratitude broadening our lives, leading us forward, changing our sense of ourselves, drawing us into the flexible, creative and motivated actions that mark the coming of God's reign.

At the beginning of the Second Week, we contemplate the Incarnation. Like Mary, we freely enlist in the service of her Son; having gratefully received the gift of forgiveness, we become gift-givers. At this time of the retreat, many people begin to imagine how they might undertake a life of service, or how the service they are already giving might be renewed or transformed. This experience itself deepens the sense of gratitude yet further, even if Ignatius does not make the point explicitly. We are drawn into a gracious, ever-continuing spiral of gratitude and service.

⁸Nico H. Frijda, 'The Law of Emotion', *American Psychologist*, 43 (1985), pp. 349-358.

*There I was—a hunk of brown drab clay.
 No shape, no form, of no use.
 Many came and tried to mould me
 Into a useful shape so that
 I could be used and enjoyed by all.
 None were able to accomplish the task!
 But then came one who knew what to do.
 He worked, kneaded and trimmed and added too.
 Slowly, oh ever so slowly, the brown drab clay
 Developed into a grace-filled vessel
 From which living nature waters could flow . . .*

From 'Gratitude', by June Shelton Harris (Charles's mother), 1983.

At the end of the *Spiritual Exercises* we find the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230-237), and once again gratitude is a central theme. Ignatius begins with the two famous sayings about love being shown in deeds rather than words, and about love consisting in mutual interchange, in the sharing of goods, in what we might call gift-giving. Already here, gratitude is an implicit theme. The mutual gift-giving expresses a foundational gratitude in the relationship. Moreover, this gratitude leads us to desire more and more to be drawn into the very being, the love, of God—a desire expressed most eloquently in the 'Take, Lord, receive'. The generative force that draws this love forward is gratitude. Gradually, this gratitude embeds itself ever more naturally and effortlessly in our personalities. We move from simply responding to God with 'thank you' to a sense of God's gracious presence in all things.

One striking point about the responses to my survey was the range of everyday human experiences that sparked gratitude: cherishing interactions with others ('I felt deeply grateful that I was blessed with a close circle of friends'); receiving personal kindnesses; overcoming adversities; encountering surprise; relishing nature; losing oneself in wonder; solving a complex problem; marvelling at someone's inventiveness; coming through seemingly impossible situations. Virtually any experience could elicit a sense of gratitude, if not

immediately then at some later point in time. Even painful experiences could become a source for redemptive insight, and hence something people were grateful for; overwhelming though they might have been at the time, people were later glad to have had them.

Ignatius was convinced that God gifted us through everything imaginable, and thus called us, in our turn, to share forward the many gifts showered upon us. The central Ignatian theme of finding God in all things is dependent on the nearly limitless possibilities for gratitude in everyday life. We can react with awe to the haunting melodies of Mozart's great D minor piano concerto just as we can be transfixed by the soothing gurgle of a flowing stream. Likewise, we can struggle with the intricacies of quantum mechanics or watch intently as a spider methodically weaves its web. We might be humbled by the love another person offers us, or find a place so serene that we enjoy the deepest serenity and peace. Ignatius reminds us that all these things are channels through which grace can flow. If we make time for contemplation, our focus can sharpen, and we can grow to become instinctive seekers of gratitude. Contemplation will help us lose the take-it-for-granted attitude that is blind to God's gifting. At deep levels, we will constantly be asking 'why me?'—not as an expression of existential curiosity, but rather of gratefully embraced humility. Ultimately we will move beyond the gifts to the giver. We will recognise God's presence manifesting itself not only through the world's endless gifts but also within our very selves: the most important gift is the very presence of God that we have become, a gift we are now called to, or even impelled to share.

Gratitude, Paradox, and the Cross

One striking example of a life of gratitude and gift-giving was Mother Teresa. Her attitude to the poor, to the people whom she sought to serve, manifests a striking paradox: she was acutely aware of how the poorest of the poor were in fact gift-givers *to her*, much more abundantly than she was to them:

Do not underestimate our practical means, the work for the poor, no matter how small and humble; they make our life something

beautiful for God. . . . (The poor) . . . are God's most precious gift to our Society—Jesus' hidden presence, so near, so able to touch.⁹

The giver became the gifted; she was the true beneficiary.

This example brings out a further fundamental characteristic of gratitude beyond the three we identified earlier, and perhaps pointing to something more profound: the people whom we gift always do more for us than we can ever do for them. Ask any parent. A parent may lovingly care for a child, at times in heroic ways; but they will also sense that what they receive from the child is somehow far more.

**Selfless love
brings its
own reward** When true friends help us in time of need, they see such actions as gift-receiving rather than gift-giving. A good teacher knows that what they teach their pupils is far less significant than what they learn from them. It is because selfless love brings its own reward in this way that we can maintain energy for recurring acts of selflessness. There is a paradox of gratitude that defies and turns upside down the common expectations of the world—a paradox not unrelated to the folly and wisdom of the cross.

This connection with the cross might be developed further. The Contemplation to Attain Love follows contemplations on the Lord's resurrection and death. And the links it makes between love and gratitude provoke a question. If Jesus' death was an act of love, was he *grateful* to die, *grateful* to take up the cross?

The standard Gospel sources for Jesus' attitude to the cross are the accounts of the Agony in the Garden preserved in the synoptics. In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death', and prays to the Father:

Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.¹⁰

This latter tradition is unlikely to be historical—after all it refers to a prayer uttered when Jesus' companions were asleep. It is significant that John's gospel preserves the tradition in a significantly different

⁹ Mother Teresa to her Sisters, 25 March 1993, quoted in Josef Neuner, 'Mother Teresa's Charism', *Review for Religious*, 60 (2001), pp. 479-493, here p. 481.

¹⁰ Mark 14: 32-42—compare Matthew 26: 36-46; Luke 22: 39-46.

form.¹¹ But the questions they raise about Jesus' attitude to his own death are real ones.

Standardly, we imagine Jesus' fearful premonition of the horror confronting him. Not even those who hold strong positions about Jesus' awareness of his divinity would deny that the human Jesus felt such fear. But perhaps more needs to be said. Jesus' loving behaviour attests to his profound gratitude—a gratitude extending to his power to give his life away. Perhaps the true source of his distress was not simply his fear of the cross, but rather the confusion between that fear and his growing sense of gratitude for what he was to accomplish. It is his initial inability to reconcile these two impulses that causes his distress; it is the recognition that the gratitude, which is of course a central element in the turmoil, is more profound that resolves it. He comes to be grateful for what he feared.

In Jesus, gratitude pierced through any numbing fear he may have felt, eradicating the interior confusion and turmoil that he found so incapacitating. Through the reassurance which this gratitude gave him, he could move with all the more clarity and integrity towards the ultimate act of love that was his death, confident that he was giving away the gift which he in person had become.

We might also speculate that he began to feel grateful for the very circumstances that were bringing about his death. He could become grateful that through his suffering he was giving himself away and ensuring our salvation. As his judicial murder played itself out, he came to realise that there was a liberating gift in this horror. He came to recognise that, in one sense, what we were doing for him was more than he could ever do for us. As he was establishing salvation as his gift to us, he was receiving—paradoxical as it may seem—our rejection as our gift to him, and was even grateful for it. Thereby he was confirming God's power to transform anything whatever. Grace can be found anywhere, for all is gift.

¹¹ John 12:27-28: "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say?—'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

Gratitude, Wellbeing and Mission

We can conclude, then, by recalling that gratitude is vital for human wellbeing. It encourages acts of kindness; it protects us from negative feelings; it sustains our sense of purpose. Most importantly, it reinforces love: it enables us to act generatively out of the love we receive. Human beings are by nature gratitude-seekers; without gratitude our lives are diminished. Ignatius never offered a developed theory of gratitude, but his writings show a keen awareness of gratitude's integral role in fostering spiritual growth, in developing our capacity to appropriate Jesus' mission in our own lives. Gratitude is central to any desire to love as Jesus did, grateful as he was for the opportunity to lay down his life.

Charles M. Shelton SJ is Associate Professor of Psychology at Regis University, Denver, Colorado, and a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice. He has written six books and over fifty articles on the topics of pastoral psychology, mental health issues, and conscience formation. His latest book, *Achieving Moral Health* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), was the First Place Award Winner in the category of Pastoral Ministry as voted by the Catholic Press Association. He is currently writing a book on the psychology of gratitude.

