

"Living a life of gratitude."

**"And be thankful."** (*Colossians 3:15*)

Fr Alexander Schmemmann, the former dean of our seminary, preached his last sermon on Thanksgiving Day in 1983. No doubt, many of you have read or heard it. You can access it at: [www.schmemmann.org/byhim/thankyoulord.html](http://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/thankyoulord.html). Each year, this very same sermon is used at the Thanksgiving Liturgy in our chapel.

When he delivered the sermon, Fr Alexander was already considerably weakened by cancer. He died only a few weeks later on December 13th. His sermon was eloquent and profound, especially given the circumstances of his illness. He began simply, "Everyone capable of thanksgiving is capable of salvation and eternal joy." In expressing these words, Fr Alexander revealed himself to be a true son of the Church, because "gratitude" was the very content of his life.

"Joy" and "gratitude" are at the very heart of the Christian life. St Paul wrote, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, *in everything* give thanks." (1 Thess. 5:16–18) In his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians, Paul is even more explicit, juxtaposing sorrow and joy and describing Christians as "sorrowing, [yet] always rejoicing" (v.10). St John Chrysostom died in exile, but it is reported that his last words were, "Glory be to God for all things."

For most of us, however, gratitude is a fleeting emotion, which comes and goes and is dependent on certain happy events and worldly circumstances. We have forgotten that God created us as "grateful" and "worshipping" beings. He created us *for* "joy" and "thanksgiving." So, what has happened to us? If we can hardly experience gratitude in good times, how is it possible to experience it in times of trial and tribulation?

How can we rediscover gratitude as the true condition of the human heart no matter what our circumstances? There are three ways.

First, mindfulness and remembrance of God's providential care in our lives: looking back, each of us can recognize His aid and intervention.

Second, mindfulness and remembrance of the immediate gifts we enjoy daily: the air we breathe and the fresh water we drink, as well as balm for our psyches, such as the friends we have or the children we've born. Keeping a journal of our bounty and referring to it often warms the heart and generates gratitude.

Third, and more sublime, mindfulness and remembrance of God's saving dispensation: with limitless love, He has sought us and has gone to the farthest depths to save us. In the beginning pages of the Book of Genesis,

God asked a rhetorical question, "Where are you Adam?" Through the rest of the biblical narrative, God answers that question in the saving work of His Son.

In pure form, thankfulness and gratitude are the result of tasting God's unfathomable love. Fr Alexander also wrote: "Just as it is impossible to know God and not give Him thanks, so it is impossible to give Him thanks without knowing Him. Thanksgiving is the sign of the knowledge of God." (*The Eucharist*)

Our thankful response to God's love constrains us; it gives us impetus to serve Him and to minister to His Church. Let's take advantage of our time here at seminary to cultivate the spirit of gratitude, so that regardless of what challenge we face, we begin to swim in its current.

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