

## **Thanksgiving Interfaith Homily: An Image of Gratitude**

Sometimes it is easy to feel gratitude. It's easy, in fact, to be grateful for this moment. Our surroundings are graceful and inspiring. We're sitting side by side with others who have come with gratitude on their minds. Comforting words (delivered in tasteful five minute bites), beautiful music, and a parade of cookies and conversation will help us experience our blessings. What more does a person need to feel gratitude rising in his or her heart?

Tomorrow might hum along in the same key. It will be easy to feel gratitude then, too. We can be thankful for a day without arguments, a day without problems, a day when a job well done has been duly acknowledged. On succeeding days a good meal, a safe home, and a loving family can evoke more gratitude. In those days, at those moments, we might be tempted to think we are living a Thanksgiving scene from a Norman Rockwell painting. I have in mind a particular painting, "Freedom from Want," a part of the Four Freedoms series Rockwell created. It depicts a Thanksgiving meal, with jovial, well-fed family and friends seated at the table. At the head of the table, a woman, a model of the kindly grandmother, prepares to lay a large, thirty-pound turkey on the table. The smiling grandfather figure stands ready to carve ample servings for all. Looking at the painting, you view this scene as if from the last available seat at the foot of the table. The joy, companionship, and good food are offered to you, too.

Ah, then, the rest of life intervenes. This evening will end. Tomorrow may bring issues at work that vex, disputes at home that can't be ignored; and obstacles that resist attempts at resolution. If Norman Rockwell painted a day like that, the kindly grandparent figures would be locked in argument at an empty table, turkey leftovers sliding down the wall where Gram threw them in frustration. On such a day, gratitude can be hard to find.

Here's another image of thanksgiving. A man dressed in simple robes, his disciples also simply dressed. Their nights are spent in the forest. Each morning they secure enough food for a day. They spend the bright hours in meditation, and they listen to the wisdom of the one who leads them. One night before sleep takes them, the Buddha says, "Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful."

How different those two images of gratitude are: on the one hand, a painting that radiates aspirations toward perfection – the perfect turkey, the perfect day, the perfect gathering. On the other hand, lives stripped of worldly accomplishments, leaning toward new knowledge, and yet even that sometimes denied them. No matter, the Buddha says. And, he leaves us with the question "Are you grateful, just to be alive?" Despite ill health, troubles, and your own inability to mold a perfect life – a life that Norman Rockwell would choose to paint – are you grateful for the gift of life?