Columns
Spirituality



The Thanksgiving Blessing collection in Anchorage, Alaska, draws volunteers to help distribute food donations Nov. 21, 2022. The annual collaboration between local faith communities and the Food Bank of Alaska helps ensure families in the community have a holiday meal. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Social Services)



by Mary M. McGlone

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In the early 1600s, an Inca nobleman named Guamán Poma wrote a long letter to King Philip III of Spain, informing him about how Spanish conquistadors had fulfilled their charge to bring Christianity to the people of his territory, including what is now known as Peru. With the text of the letter and hundreds of illustrations, he explained that while the Spaniards did bring Christianity to the New World, their behavior generally belied the faith they preached. They rapaciously dispossessed a great civilization, showing that they were largely unconvinced of the message of love of neighbor at the core of the Gospel they supposedly believed in.

Recognizing that the popes had given Spain permission to colonize for the purpose of evangelization, Guamán Poma informed the king that the Spaniards' proselytizing task had been carried out; there were then enough Christians in the empire to continue to build the church. Thus, the time had come for the Spaniards to return home to Europe.

As everyone knows, that didn't happen. In reality, few of the conquistadors or colonizers of South and North America showed any significant evidence of being genuine Christians, much less of approaching the people of the New World as brothers and sisters in the faith.

One of Guamán Poma's most barbed cartoons shows a conquistador kneeling before a seated Inca, admitting that gold was his sustenance, the true object of his worship.

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 19, 2023

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31
Psalm 128
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
Matthew 25:14-30

Remembering this story as we approach Thanksgiving suggests an interesting approach to Jesus' parable of a man who entrusted his possessions to his servants so that they would carry on his business.

Matthew goes all out in his rendition of this story. (Luke 19:12-27 offers a more spartan version.) Each talent Matthew mentions equaled about 20 years' wages — no mean sum! We shouldn't feel too sorry for the servant who only got one. The owner was not only wealthy, but extravagant in his trust!

While the numbers are astounding, Jesus' emphasis is on the way each servant understood his relationship to the owner.

For two of them, the master's trust impelled them to imitate his risky behavior, giving them the courage to "trade" or work with the owner's fortune, assuming risk of loss for the hope of gain. They gave the owner the highest compliment possible by imitating him.

The third placed his faith in the value of what he had at hand; fearing the consequences of a loss, he played it safe, effectively repudiating the owner's lavish approach to life.

Today's Psalm centers on the idea of fear of the Lord. Some hear that phrase as a grim reminder of the final judgment: Fear the Lord who has been watching for your missteps and will bring you to justice! Others understand fear of the Lord as the awe they feel when glimpsing the *mysterium tremendum*, the overwhelming grace and bounty of the loving Creator of the universe manifest in all creatures, great and small.

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The grim will respond with prudent timidity — striving to avoid any mistake. Others will be moved to imitate the unrestrained generosity of the God who has put so much in their hands. They trust that the owner understands the risks and will stay with them through it all.

Obviously, by now, we are speaking not of the parable, but its subject: God.

People who risk imitating divine openhandedness collaborate with their creator. In the symbolism of the Hebrew Scriptures, they are the people of God who respond like the worthy wife, laboring and continuing the creative work of the God who espoused her. Like their spouse, their works will inspire admiration and imitation — another way of saying that their way of life evangelizes.

We celebrate our Thanksgiving feast as a time of thanks for life and the remembrance of how Native Americans' generosity saved the lives of North American colonists who had invaded their land. The feast invites us to contemplate the prodigal trust God shows by allowing us to participate in the ongoing work of creation. We are invited to reverence every bit of creation as a manifestation of God.

To the extent that we do that, our behavior and love will mirror the worthy wife rather than the conquistador.

Genuine thanksgiving will motivate us to accept the trust put in us and imitate God's limitless liberality. As we do so, we may just find the courage to risk investing everything we have been given and all that we are into living and sharing the Gospel.

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