



FAITH: A FRESH TAKE



November 5, 2015



CNS/KAREN CALLAWAY

PROFESSED AND CHOPPED CHAMP: Franciscan Sister Alicia Torres makes her final vows as a religious sister at Chicago's Mission of Our Lady of the Angels Oct. 4. Father Bob Lombardo, director of the mission, holds her hands while she makes her profession. Sister Alicia won a special Thanksgiving competition on the Food Network's "Chopped." She said her \$10,000 in winnings would go to feed the poor in the community.

Gratitude Is a Spiritual Practice

Like many families, during the holidays we try to focus on thankfulness by asking each guest at a festive meal to express that for which they are most thankful.



Surprising how tongue-tied a roomful of noisy siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins suddenly becomes when given this task. Sometimes, one kid

comes up with a winning response — "I'm thankful for my family," — and the sentiment becomes repeated by every child at the table until I want to scream, "Can't you guys think of anything original?"

But, since we also focus on not screaming during the holidays, I can only hope that this unanimous sense of thankfulness for relatives will temper the political and football rivalries that may pop up during the course of the meal.

Gratitude is supposed to be a key to our spiritual lives. So why is it that sometimes it feels so rote? How can this "thank you" to God — which the mystic Meister Eckhart said was so important it could be our only prayer — become so routine?

Recently, in an effort to reduce the population of our overcrowded prisons, the federal government released 6,000 nonviolent offenders who had been given mandatory sentences.

I listened to one of these newly released prisoners being interviewed in late October on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition Saturday." He provided a lesson in gratitude that seemed worthy of a saint.

In the early 1990s, Michael Fitzgerald Wilson was given a sentence of life without the possibility of parole for a first-time, nonviolent drug offense. During this time, the nation was responding to the drug crisis by mandatory sentencing, and prisons were filling so rapidly that soon the

U.S. imprisoned more of its population than any nation in the world.

The presiding judge felt the sentence was harsh, but the law forced his hand. Although no drugs were found in his home, Wilson was charged with distributing crack cocaine. A bad thing — but so bad that we should throw away the key and with it his life?

Wilson left behind a 3-year-old son who is now 26. Throughout his imprisonment, Wilson tried to maintain a relationship with his son that endures to this day.

Now freed, is he angry? "No," he says.

Instead, he thanks God for his freedom, and he's thankful for many things. He even says, in a voice slurred by a stroke he suffered in prison, "I thank God for ... even the people who had testified against me."

You can sense his inner peace. Gratitude seems to wash away the wasted years of youth and health, the injustice that would leave a lesser man bitter.

How does one arrive at such a place of spiritual grace? Does grace bring us to gratitude? Perhaps a practice of gratitude helps us to see and accept grace.

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught that we should see God in all things. That's an invitation to learn gratitude. Because in the normal course of a day or a year or a lifetime, things happen for which we may not express gratitude.

It's one thing to see God when you get what you want; it's quite another to thank God for his presence when you suffer things you didn't choose.

So when bad things happen, we must ask, where is God in this? And that place where God is, in the midst of struggle and darkness, is that for which we are grateful.

Gratitude is a spiritual practice. All the theology and the doctrine and the sophistry in the world don't tell me as much about grace as Michael Fitzgerald Wilson told me in his simple litany of gratitude.

— Effie Caldarola

(A Catholic News Service column.)

The Blessings of Social Media

Social media can be both a blessing and a curse. As much as I enjoy viewing photos of my friend's kids and quirky status updates that make me smile, my productivity is definitely impacted significantly by the scrolling on my phone or computer.



When there is laundry piling up or articles to write, it seems much easier and more convenient to log on to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat instead of tending to my real responsibilities. But, the threat of missing something important — like what my high school friend ate for dinner or my mother's recount of her day — looms, and we often succumb to the temptation to scroll through our news feeds.

Recent studies have shown that social media is damaging communication skills and producing a narcissistic society that focuses more on how their lives appear to others versus the reality of the situation. As much as I enjoy posting the successes of my students or my children, I have to wonder if the persona I have created on social media is who I really am. By only posting the positive aspects of our lives, are we eliminating the possibility of making real connections with our "friends?"

It is no secret that everyone faces challenges that can send them into

despair. We often reach out to close friends and family members when all hope or faith is lost. In this day and age, though, many people are also reaching out to their online friends for help and support and making real connections virtually. In my opinion, connections do not always have to be face-to-face to be effective or impactful.

A quick scroll through today's news feed left me feeling as if there is a positive side to social media. Several prayer requests, inspiring spiritual messages and happy faces popped up on my phone, making me smile and think fondly of people I haven't seen in years. Messages of hope swarmed a friend's page who had just lost her husband at a young age to a sudden heart attack. Online friends rallied in support of the right to express their faith while reposting political articles. And most impressive was the multiple posts from people who have vowed to write something they are thankful for every day in November.

Social media may be time consuming, but time well spent offering condolences and faithful expressions is never a waste. And, reflecting on the blessings God has provided during the month of November is one of the best ways to express our thanks publicly.

— Shannon Philpott

Shannon Philpott is a freelance writer and college journalism instructor, but most of all a mother of two teens. You can see her work at www.shannonphilpott.com.

HISPANIC CATHOLICS IN THE U.S.

55
MILLION
HISPANICS
IN THE U.S.
AVERAGE AGE OF



29

LARGEST CONCENTRATIONS
CALIFORNIA (15 MILLION) | TEXAS (10.4 MILLION) | FLORIDA (4.8 MILLION)

30.4 MILLION CATHOLIC HISPANICS IN THE U.S.



3%

PRIESTS
IDENTIFY AS
HISPANIC

16%

DEACONS
IDENTIFY AS
HISPANIC

2005-2010 ATTENDANCE AT PARISHES
GREW DUE TO HISPANIC PRESENCE BY



40%

HOWEVER,
ONLY



45%

ARE REGISTERED
WITH A PARISH

SOURCES: PEW, CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE APOSTOLATE
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Fresh Take: a way to look at faith from a different perspective

This is an online-only page dedicated to young adult Catholics, their interests, their needs, their challenges and their faith.

We want to give young adults something to "chew on," to think about when they're looking for something more than an on-line horoscope

or the latest star news.

This page offers columns we believe will interest our young adults. Let us know.

Email us at cathnews@bellevillemessenger.org with questions, suggestions or for more information.

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