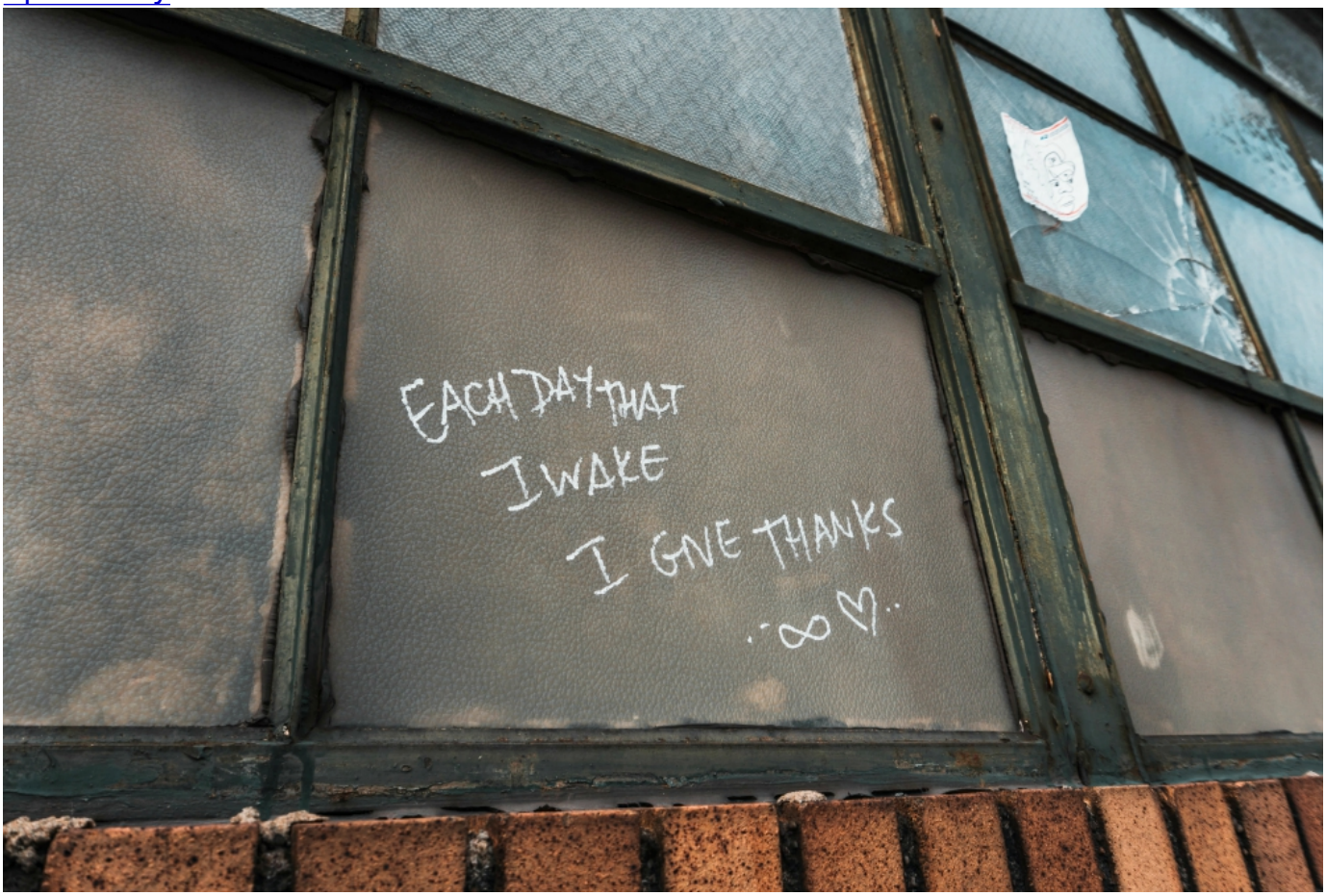
Opinion
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Tatiana Rodriguez)



by Daniel P. Horan

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Tomorrow, we in the United States mark a national holiday that has been in existence since Abraham Lincoln declared it such in 1863. The meaning of Thanksgiving has been the source of great contestation, confusion and development since the early 17th century when the Pilgrims (a term applied in the late 19th century to the theocratic Puritan colonists) arrived in New England in 1620 and celebrated some kind of harvest feast in 1621.

It has long been recognized that the complexity of the relationship between the English settlers and indigenous peoples has been glossed over in the standard presentations of that "first Thanksgiving." Most notably, if there was in fact some kind of peaceful meal or celebration between the two communities, that tranquility was short-lived as the colonists eventually decimated the indigenous Wampanoag people by force and disease within a generation of that storied supper.

If the historical origins of Thanksgiving are complicated and not well-understood, things have not gotten much better in our own time. In recent decades, the holiday has become commodified and turned into a marketable event, with stores carrying an array of turkeys, gourds and pilgrim tchotchkes, and grocery stores taking advance reservations for the bird size and quality of your choice.

This capitalist takeover of the historically dubious holiday has been made worse in recent years by the growing encroachment of "Black Friday" backward into Thanksgiving day itself, which has forced those who work in the retail and service industries to abandon their own opportunity to be grateful with their loved ones in order to serve in the insatiable desires of the sale-hungry masses. (Fortunately, this trend does appear to have been curbed somewhat by increasing public outcry).

While the questions and concerns surrounding the Thanksgiving holiday past and present might give us reason to despair in the face of celebrating this annual event, I actually think there's good cause to rehabilitate the holiday, especially from a Catholic Christian perspective.

Because Thanksgiving became identified with the last Thursday in November, it coincidentally falls just before the end of the liturgical year of our church calendar. It's rather commonplace that the weekend immediately following Thanksgiving marks the First Sunday of Advent, which is the opening of the new liturgical year. Thanksgiving, while typically viewed as a secular holiday, actually offers Christians a

liminal moment to pause between the then and now, the here and there, the old and new, the already and not yet. It is a good time to examine one's life, to look back over the year that is about to conclude and consider what is in store for what lies ahead.

In particular, this is an opportunity to do something of a gratitude assessment. What has happened (or not happened) during the previous year for which you are grateful? While looking back over the previous months, where has God been present to you in your experience? How have you cultivated a spirit of thankfulness and gratitude for what you have received, the relationships that you have, and who you are as an embodied, living, loveable gift of God?

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This last point is important. Too often any explicit articulation of gratitude on Thanksgiving takes place when the dinner host invites those gathered to share something for which you are grateful (that is, when the host typically puts guests on the spot). What generally results is a litany of superficial declarations about things thought of five minutes before dinner happens to be served. While well-intentioned, these items are usually shared under duress and without much reflection. But it doesn't have to be this way.

A rehabilitation of Thanksgiving offers us the opportunity to renew the practice of gratitude, not as a one-time annual tradition, but as regular discipline of learning to see God in all things and open ourselves to a spirit of thankfulness for all that we are and all that we have received.

This is not a call to Pollyannaish banality, as if what it means to be grateful requires brushing aside the real pain, suffering and loss experienced to one degree or another. This is, instead, a countercultural stance that challenges us to practice seeing the good amid the bad, the gift beside the struggle, the hope that overcomes the fear, the life that prevails over death.

When I think about the potential we have to transform our understanding and practice of the Thanksgiving, I think of the insights of Benedictine Br. David Steindl-Rast, who summarized well the importance of "grateful living" in a popular TED Talk some years back. Recognizing that all people want to be happy, Steindl-Rast

explains, "It is not happiness that makes us grateful; it's gratefulness that makes us happy."

Western cultures with their focus on commercialism sell us false promises that once we're happy, usually after making some kind of purchase or achieving a social marker, then we will arrive at a state of gratitude and contentment. Steindl-Rast argues that this simply does not follow.

He calls instead for "grateful living," a practice of becoming aware that every moment is a "given moment," that every moment is a gift. Steindl-Rast does not say we ought to be grateful for every*thing*. He acknowledges there are many, many things — like violence, suffering, infidelity, etc. — for which we should not be grateful. But he argues that we can nevertheless strive to become grateful for every given moment, even in the midst of difficult realities.

He offers a simple methodology for the practice of grateful living: Stop. Look. Go.

First, we need to learn to stop, to intentionally pause amid the chaos of a society that beckons us on with ever increasing rapidity. Just as our holidays have become commodified and commercialized, so have our lives and time. We are discouraged from resting, told that we are lazy or unproductive if we do not go above and beyond in our work. We need to learn to slow down and be still.

Next, we must train ourselves to look, not just with our eyes but also with all our senses and even our whole being. Once we've stopped, we can then begin to attune ourselves to the beauty, love and divine presence among and within us. But it requires practice and intentionality, and it means we cannot simply go through life on autopilot.

Finally, Steindl-Rast says that if we open our hearts to truly see what is around us with gratitude, it will lead us to action, which is where the "go" comes in. This experience may lead us to express care, concern and love for another. It may lead us to creative expression. It may lead us to simply appreciate and enjoy the moment in which we find ourselves. Whatever we are called to do or be can only occur if we have first stopped and looked.

The challenge for us this week is to see Thanksgiving as an important opportunity to renew our commitment to the ongoing discipline of gratitude. In doing so, we might

shed new light on an underappreciated and misunderstood holiday.

May this year's Thanksgiving celebration be a time for each of us to recommit ourselves to being a people of gratitude by pausing in the busyness of modern life, seeing the world anew with eyes capable of recognizing the Spirit of God present in our midst, and acting in such a way as to be evangelists of gratitude, embodying thanksgiving with our whole lives.

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