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Opinion



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by Daniel P. Horan

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Around this time last year, I wrote about the need to "rehabilitate Thanksgiving" and be more deliberate about practicing gratitude. November 2019 seems like a lifetime ago, far from the never-ending horrors 2020 has wrought on this nation and world. I mused back then about the ways we might more authentically engage in some of the rituals of the American Thanksgiving holiday, especially by avoiding commercialism and striving to be more sincere in our reflection on those things for which we are most thankful.

But if it was hard to be thankful with sincerity last year, how much more difficult is it in a year in which millions of people are sick and more than 250,000 of our fellow citizens have died from a pandemic that has been mishandled by the federal administration from the start?

What can be said today about the importance of moving beyond the superficiality of spontaneous listings of things for which we are grateful when put on the spot by our Thanksgiving-dinner hosts when most of us will not travel to be with family or friends this year?

Like so many other people, I am struggling to be grateful this Thanksgiving. While I still believe that Christians and all people of good will are called to practice gratitude over dwelling on all the understandably bleak and depressing circumstances of our time, I also strongly resist the temptation of naïve sentimentality or clichéd searches for the "silver lining" in the storm of 2020.

So in recent days I have brought to prayer these concerns, my laments, moments edging near despair, and all the frustrations and fears that nine months of pandemic, ongoing reckoning with America's original sin of racism, lack of travel, isolation, and increased distance from family and friends has wrought. It was in the midst of such reflection that I found myself surprised by a natural thanksgiving for the technological marvels that, while not supplanting nor mitigating the true pain and suffering of the moment, have made our lives immeasurably better in the midst

of such tragic times. Each unexpected insight of gratitude surfaced after reflecting first on a particular difficulty of the moment.

Thinking about how different Thanksgiving and Christmas will be this year, I lament the challenges and losses. We will not be able to invite guests to join us for Thanksgiving dinner at our Franciscan community nor travel to visit our families around Christmas. While I am immensely grateful to live in a religious community of friars who provide one another with support during the holidays, it will nevertheless not be the same.

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As difficult as these holiday circumstances are, I found myself immensely grateful for technologies like Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, Face Time and other applications that connect us to one another in amazing ways. It is not the same as being together in person, but how blessed we are to live in a time when we can be together virtually through wondrous technologies that we might too easily take for granted.

Like millions of others, I am sick of meetings and teaching via Zoom; the thought of another meeting in front of my computer screen elicits a Pavlovian recoiling in my soul. But when I choose to focus on gratitude, I realize how much worse and lonely and depressing our circumstances would be without these resources, and I suddenly become very thankful for them.

Another source of great frustration and despondency is the existence of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 and the rapidity with which its unexpected appearance went from local outbreak to regional epidemic to global pandemic. This disease is, after all, the primary cause for the circumstances that lead to this year's holiday disappointments and sadness.

But the recent news about promising results from phase-three vaccine trials conducted by multiple pharmaceutical companies has also given us reason for thankfulness. To be clear, we are still very far from the end of this pandemic and the serious threat it poses to individuals, communities and all of humanity. Yet the likelihood of vaccines on the horizon that appear more than 90% efficacious can't help but buoy my spirit.

Furthermore, the record time — less than a year — in which these vaccine candidates have been developed was made possible by new technologies that are awe-inspiring. Unlike most traditional vaccines, which typically rely on live but attenuated or inactivated viruses that simulate an infection (without causing one) so that our bodies produce antibodies and eventual immunity to the active virus, the COVID-19 vaccines now on the verge of distribution use a totally new technique.

Technology that allows for precise clinical manipulation of messenger RNA (often abbreviated mRNA) is at the heart of this amazing development. One NBC News article summarizes how this new vaccine technology works in creating a successful immunity response in the human subject:

> The Pfizer vaccine and the Moderna vaccine use synthetic mRNA that contains information about the coronavirus's signature spike protein. The vaccines essentially work by sneaking in instructions that direct the body to produce a small amount of the spike protein. Once the immune system detects this protein, the body subsequently begins producing protective antibodies.

In an interview, Paula Cannon, an associate professor of microbiology at the University of Southern California, said: "In some ways, we're lucky in 2020 that this very powerful technology was ready for prime time, because it could be a really big advantage."

Indeed, what a marvelously providential time for us to live in! While the fast and safe development of an efficacious vaccine for a new and dangerous virus does not mitigate the true horror and loss of life that has wreaked havoc across the globe, it does give us reason for gratitude for the researchers and technologies that makes such a formidable solution possible in the first place.

Finally, in the midst of this pandemic we have also grappled with the persistence of systemic racism and injustice in our communities and nation. While I am enraged with the full force of righteous anger in the face of such inexcusable violence against people of color, oftentimes deployed with impunity especially by law enforcement officers, I have found myself reflecting with gratitude on the condition that has made such widespread and growing awareness of these horrifying realities possible.

As people of color rightfully note, such injustice and anti-Black violence is not new. But what is new is the omnipresence of smartphones, access to the Internet, social media platforms and other means of communications technologies that allow for widespread dissemination of indisputable evidence of systemic racism in action. I am thankful for the technology that forces our society to face its own demons and inequity, its violence and racism. The only way such evils can be confronted and changed is if those white people who have the privilege to otherwise ignore these realities cannot ignore them any longer.

As hard as this holiday season will be, I am tremendously thankful for the technologies that aid in that important work of racial justice, connect us to loved ones across great distances, and help develop lifesaving vaccines.

[Daniel P. Horan is the Duns Scotus Professor of Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where he teaches systematic theology and spirituality. His recent book is *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology*. Follow him on Twitter: @DanHoranOFM]

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