

A Thankful Heart

by Rev. Robert J. Hater

A thankful heart lies at the center of the Christian life. I was fortunate to learn this lesson when I was only five years old—on Thanksgiving Day.

All day long we looked forward to the wonderful Thanksgiving meal that Mom was preparing. Shortly before we were to sit down at table, the front doorbell rang. My four-year-old sister, Mary Ann, and I ran to answer it. A boy about eleven and a girl about ten stood there. The girl held a baby, covered with a shawl. The boy said, "We are poor and have no money for food this Thanksgiving. Will you give us money so we can buy food?"

Mary Ann and I called our mother. Mom answered, "We don't have much money, but we would like you to share what we have. We invite you to join us for our Thanksgiving." The children seemed surprised, and the boy said they could not stay. Mom replied, "Then let us prepare meals for you to take along with you."

While the children waited in the hall, Mom, Mary Ann, and I went into the kitchen and packed the meals. I felt

good as we gathered turkey, dressing, cranberries, potatoes, beans, a piece of cake, and soda pop. Mom prepared a bottle of milk for the baby. Mary Ann and I were joyful when we gave the food to the children. They took it and left.

Since it was a beautiful day, my sister and I went onto the front porch to watch the children leave. They went down the steps and walked up the street toward the intersection. When they arrived there, the girl suddenly threw the baby to the boy. We screamed, "They're hurting the baby, they're hurting the baby!" Hurrying inside, we told Mom and Dad.

All of us returned immediately to the porch. As we got there, the girl, now holding the baby, tucked it under her arm. As she did, the boy, who carried the food, laughed in the strangest way. Then he took the Thanksgiving meals we had so lovingly prepared and threw them down the sewer. They continued laughing as they disappeared around the corner.

My sister and I cried, "They hurt the baby and threw away our food!" As

Reverend Robert J. Hater is an internationally known lecturer and writer and has served as professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton, Ohio. Father Hater was the religious education director for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati from 1973 to 1979 and initiated the Lay Pastoral Ministry Program for the Archdiocese. He received the 1994 Catechetical Award from the National Conference of Catechetical Leadership. Father Hater holds a doctorate in Philosophy from St. John's University, Jamaica, New York.

The important thing is to give with a thankful heart.

we cried, Mom and Dad embraced us. Mom said, "Bob and Mary Ann, it's okay. We are going to have a wonderful Thanksgiving." We continued to cry, "But they hurt the baby and threw away our food!"

Mom said, "The children tricked us. That wasn't a baby; it was a doll. They didn't want food; they wanted money.

Nevertheless, you are going to learn a very important lesson today." When we quieted down, Mom spoke words that made an indelible impression on us. She said, "We gave the children a wonderful gift today, sharing a big part of our Thanksgiving meal with them. This was a wonderful gift, even though they did not accept

it. The important thing is that we gave with a thankful heart."

Mom continued, "God did that long ago, when he gave us the greatest gift—his own Son. Just as the children rejected our gift today some people rejected Jesus too. Some continue to reject him today by lying, cheating, or hurting one another. But God keeps on giving, and Jesus is the greatest gift we could receive. Let's remember God's gift and all our gifts today as we go in and have a wonderful Thanksgiving meal together."

This attitude of thankfulness is our fundamental perspective as Christians. It is our first prayer, the acknowledgment of our total dependency on God, and our acceptance of the great love which God desires to share with us.

For Reflection

What great gifts is God offering you in your life? How do you express your thanks for these gifts?