Every year Thanksgiving Day is inevitably for some an ambivalent holiday. In the course of previous year some family member or friend lost a job or became seriously ill or perhaps even died. Some years there have been widely shared challenges and loses of one kind or another. That is very much the case this year with the COVID 19 pandemic.

In spite of all that individual Canadians and Canada as a whole have had to face, most of us still have a great deal to be thankful for, beginning with the fact that we live in this country and benefit from so much that is positive in it . We are particularly thankful this year for our health care system and for all the nurses, doctors and others involved in it. Over the last eighteen months they have truly gone the proverbial extra mile for of us. Many of us have our own personal stories of acts of kindness and generosity toward us for which we are grateful.

From the beginning, Thanksgiving had a decidedly religious character. People saw it as an occasion to give thanks to God for the yearly harvest and for other blessings that individuals and communities had experienced during the previous year. The fact of its being a harvest festival led inevitably to an emphasis on food and on a Thanksgiving Dinner at which members of the family would come together and share in a traditional meal. For most people today, the meal continues to be at the centre of their Thanksgiving celebrations.

To feel gratitude in one’s heart and to give expression to it are central to any genuine religious and human attitude. To believe in God at all is to believe that he is the creator, the source and goal of all that is. The world and all that is in it including ourselves depend ultimately on the infinite goodness and power of God for our initial and continuing existence.

Real gratitude presupposes a recognition of the many ways in which what we are and what we have are the result of countless gifts, gifts of family and friends, of education and culture, of freedom and of a generally thriving economy. Gifts, large or small, call forth a corresponding expression of thanks. If I am convinced that somehow I have achieved everything that I am and have on my own, then I would have no reason to be grateful. To have such a view is to be blind to a fundamental truth of human life. W need and depend on one another.

Gratitude is at the heart of any authentic Christian life. The creeds, which in their different ways sum up the fundamental truths of Christian faith, emphasize the element of gift. God created us and in his only Son, Jesus Christ, redeemed us. The forgiveness and life he brought continue to be at work in us, in the church and in the world through the further gift of the Holy Spirit.

With the passing years, I have come to a greater appreciation of the extraordinary gift that the Mass represents. At its centre is a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving, the Eucharistic prayer. In it we remember and give thanks for the words and actions of Jesus over the bread and the wine at the Last Supper, words and gestures which we repeat at every Mass.

I have been able to do a range of things in my life as a priest, teacher and theologian. Among them, the Mass or Eucharist has become for me increasingly significant and rewarding. It gives a frame and structure to my life. Sometimes we remain on the surface of its ritual; at other times we find ourselves being drawn more profoundly into it. St Paul once said, “I live now, not I but Christ lives in me.” That is something which, at least from time to time and with greater or less intensity, we are all invited to experience in the Mass.

To enter into the movement of praise and thanksgiving at the heart of the Eucharist is to learn to recognize the gifts which are so much a part of our lives and to respond to them with gratitude,

In the Eucharist Christ gives himself to us so that we might give ourselves to him and to one another. Gifts call forth gifts. “What have we,” Paul once asked, “that we have not received?” Because we have received so much, we should be both grateful and more than willing to share what we are and have with others. In doing so, we become for them a gift which, we hope and trust, will inspire them to give of themselves, thus reinforcing that endless cycle of gift and gratitude, of gratitude and gift that is at the heart of human life.