

CONCERNING UNGRATEFULNESS

—from the book *The Salvation of Sinners*—

Hear, O heavens and listen, O earth. For the Lord has spoken: “I have begotten and brought up sons, but they rejected Me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know Me, and the people do not understand Me” (Isa. 1:2-3).

Animals acknowledge their benefactors, they show affection to their owners, and protect their masters when necessary. Wild beasts such as lions and bears are disarmed of their innate fierceness, they become tranquil, and display gratitude to people who provide them with even the slightest assistance. People, on the other hand, who are presumed to be rational and sensitive beings, possess callous, insensitive hearts, and remain unresponsive and ungrateful toward their benefactors. In this manner, animals seem to exhibit human feelings, whereas humans appear to conduct themselves wilder than animals.

Ungratefulness is an abominable evil that is not only censured by Christians but also considered reprehensible by people of all faiths—even idolators of ancient times, as documented in numerous historical accounts. Furthermore, ungratefulness is loathed not only by people, but even Christ Himself, Who is meek and humble in heart. For, when He appeared upon the earth, Christ accepted all sinners (including fornicators, thieves, and publicans) with utmost compassion, and He never voiced sentiments of dissatisfaction or frustration against anyone—except in the case of people who exhibited ungratefulness.

After healing the ten lepers, Christ inquired about the nine ungrateful lepers who did not return to acknowledge the invaluable gift of health He had granted them. **“Were there not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except for this foreigner?” (Lk. 17:17).** With these words, the God-man expresses His amazement and displeasure with people who are ungrateful. Indeed, there is nothing more astonishing or baffling than an ungrateful person who does not acknowledge and recognize the help and benefit he has received from others.

If all living creatures naturally love and show affection toward their benefactors, and if the law of gratitude is powerful enough to tame even the

wildest beasts, why should we become crueler than the irrational animals? Why should we not love, respect, and thank our God Who has given us so much?

O Lord, You have created my soul in Your image and likeness! You have formed my body using an intricate system of organs and senses, with such wisdom and masterful foresight. Your providence is what sustains me each and every day. Your various living and non-living creations serve me. Your food nourishes me. Your sky extends as a protective cover above me. Your angels watch over me. You constantly enlighten and guide me. You lovingly tolerate and endure all my sinful actions. Who provides me with my very existence, my life, and everything else I require, if not You—the source of creation, the beginning of all beings, and the giver of every gift and all graces? Truly, how indebted we are to our tremendous benefactor!

If we were missing a single body part (like one of our hands, legs, eyes, or ears) and there was a physician who healed us out of the goodness of his heart, without asking for any payment in return, wouldn't we feel infinitely grateful and indebted to him? Yes, we certainly would! How grateful and indebted, then, must we feel to God Who has given us an entire body, replete with all of its vital biological structures? And if we are infinitely indebted to God for the physical and material attributes He has given us, how much more grateful should we be for the gifts of Grace He has bestowed unto us? I will forego all His other blessings and focus directly on the sublime and paramount gift of our redemption.

If you sin, O man, what harm have you done to God? If your evil actions increase exponentially, what insult have you caused Him? Conversely, if you happen to accomplish lofty virtues, what benefit are they to Him? As God, He is wealthy, wise, and almighty. It is not possible for His wealth, wisdom, and might to increase or decrease. He is the same today, just as He was prior to creating the universe—no smaller, no greater. He does not become more glorified when all His angels praise Him, nor would He be more exalted if all humans were to be saved. Likewise, if all people were to lose their salvation and be condemned to Hell, He would in no way be any less blessed. This eternal Ruler and King of kings lowered the heavens and voluntarily accepted to descend into this earthly exile, to assume human flesh, to shoulder mankind's entire debt and sum total of sins, to accept a plethora of scorns and ridicules, and finally to receive a

torturous death, for no reason other than on account of His infinite compassion and love for us.

O Lord, great and unimaginable is Your compassion and goodness! Let the heavens and the angels declare Your wondrous works! Because we unworthy humans are incapable of rendering the appropriate thanksgiving to You, and all we can do is stand silently in awe as we marvel at Your divine providence.

For me, the wretched servant, the boundless God was born an infant, accepted circumcision on the eighth day, and walked upon the earth for thirty entire years. For me, O Lord, You toiled, sweated, fasted, cried, and suffered all the pains of the flesh. Because of me, O Lord, You were slapped, scorned, whipped, and ultimately put to death in a most-dishonorable manner. How can I possibly repay You for everything You have done for me? It is not possible to repay You for even one drop of the immaculate blood You spilled for me. How is it possible for me not to love Him Who loved me to such a degree? Christ our Lord did all these things in order to overwhelm us with His love, and so that we may cleave to Him, just as He stated in His Gospel: **“And if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to Myself” (Jn. 12:32)**. What type of chain will You use, my beloved Jesus, to draw us toward You? To this Christ would reply: “I will use the bonds of grace and goodness, and the force of love.” Who cannot be overpowered by such magnificent gifts and surrender to such incomprehensible love!

If a drop of water that continuously drips upon a hard rock eventually erodes it over time, how is it possible for the rivers of graces and blessings that God pours upon us not to soften our hearts? If steel, when it is placed in a fire, becomes red hot and indistinguishable from the fire on account of its contact with it, how is it possible for our hearts not to ignite and be set ablaze as they are ceaselessly enveloped with God’s divine love? How is it possible for us ungrateful ones to disregard such a Lord and transgress His commandments?

When the immoral and shameless wife of Potiphar attempted to entice the all-comely Joseph to sin, Joseph replied in this manner: **“My lord has committed all he has to my hand. ... except for you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness?” (Gn. 39:8-9)**. Take note how he did not say that it was improper, but that he was not able to do such a thing. In this manner, he indicated that special benefactions not only strip us of the desire

but even of the ability to harm our benefactor. They bind a person and immobilize his body parts in such a way that he is no longer able to harm or in any way wrong his benefactor. If all the help and assistance this foreign master had provided to Joseph were worthy of gratitude, how much more deserving of our gratefulness are the graces and gifts that our almighty Lord has given to us? Potiphar provided Joseph with a finite amount of wealth. God granted us the entire world: the sky, the earth, the sun, the ocean, the rivers, the fish, the animals, the birds, and everything else that exists. He created everything for our own benefit and delight. If we are bound by such a plethora of blessings and gifts, how then can we dare to sadden such a charitable and generous Benefactor?

O how senseless we are! If someone were to give us something of great value, for example a piece of property, or a yacht, or a building that was worth millions of dollars, wouldn't we feel obligated to that person for the rest of our life? Wouldn't we feel indebted to him, wouldn't we love him and happily do anything he asked of us? Yes, we certainly would! We have oftentimes seen this take place with our own eyes. If on account of such gifts we show such gratitude and loyalty to another human being, why do we not act in the same way toward our big-hearted and magnanimous Benefactor, the Creator of all things, Who has granted to us all these innumerable blessings? We are indeed more insensitive than the wild animals! How is it that we cannot sense and recognize our ungratefulness? What lion or beast ever dared to harm its benefactor?

In the life of Saint Gerasimos of Jordan, who is commemorated on March 4th, it is recorded that the Saint once found a lion that had a sharp piece of wood stuck in its paw. Because the Saint removed the fragment and cleaned the wound, henceforth not only did this lion never part from him, but it also obeyed him throughout the rest of its life. The Saint had appointed this lion to guard his the monastery's donkey. Each day the lion would lead the donkey to a pasture and watch over it as it grazed, and in the evening he would guide it back to the monastery. One day, a group of merchants passing through the area found a way to steal the donkey. When the lion returned to the Saint that evening without the donkey, the Saint assumed that the lion had eaten it, and so he commanded the lion to take on the donkey's job of carrying water from the well to the monastery every day. Unbelievable as it may sound, the lion did not resist, it did not become

aggressive, it did not disobey! Rather, it patiently and tamely allowed the Saint's disciple to load it with water, which it would carry back to the monastery for an entire year. Until one day, as the lion was making its way to the well, this group of merchants happened to be in the area again. The lion immediately recognized the donkey, and straightaway charged toward them; he took the rope (to which the donkey was tied) in his mouth and led the donkey to Saint Gerasimos. Upon seeing this, the Saint forgave the lion and told him that he was free to go wherever he pleased. The lion gratefully bowed its head and departed. But even then it did not forget the Saint, but it would continue to go back to him every eight days and prostrate itself before him. After Saint Gerasimos fell asleep in the Lord, the next time the lion showed up looking for him, the Saint's disciple told the lion that his elder had passed away and pointed at his burial site. The lion then proceeded to the grave, where it groaned and lamented as if it were a human being. Finally, letting out a loud roar, it collapsed and died upon the grave.

On March 5th, we commemorate Saint Mark the Ascetic. One time, a lioness brought one of her cubs, which was blind, to Saint Mark, gesturing and imploring him to heal her cub. The Saint spit on the young lion's eyes and immediately its vision was restored. The lioness, out of gratitude, subsequently brought a hide of a ram to the Saint as a form of repayment to him. Such similar events are recorded in numerous lives of the Saints.

Lest someone, however, contend that these were miraculous events that took place on account of the virtues of holy men, and not necessarily on account of the animals' sense of gratitude, listen to the following account that took place with pagans, who were neither living during the period of Christian Grace, nor possessed holiness.

During ancient times, it was customary for criminals to be punished and executed by wild beasts. Once, in Rome, when a certain criminal by the name of Androdon was thrown to the lions in an amphitheater, an exceptionally large lion amongst the pack stood next to him and fended off the other lions, not allowing them to approach or harm this man. The emperor who was watching was amazed to see such a remarkable event. He ordered for the convict to be brought before him, and he proceeded to ask him about the surprising behavior of the lion. To this, the convict responded, "I recall, your Highness, that one day as I was walking through a forest during midday, I came across a cave, which I

entered in order to rest. Within the cave, I encountered a lion that was limping. As soon as the beast saw me, it raised one of its front paws, which it could not step on, whimpering and motioning me to help it. I then proceeded assertively to remove a large splinter that had been embedded in its paw, I cleaned the wound and tended to it as best as I could. Thereafter, for the next four days during my stay in the cave, this lion would bring me portions of meat from the animals it hunted. I believe that this is the very same lion, which recognized me as its benefactor and out of gratefulness protected me in such an extraordinary manner today.” Upon hearing these words, the emperor freed this man and also gave him the lion, which from then on would follow behind him in the streets of Rome as a tame sheep, without harming any person. Witnessing such a phenomenon, the citizens began to call the lion “Androdon’s keeper” and refer to Androdon as “the lion’s physician.”

After Godfrey of Bouillon became the ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, one day while hunting he came across a lion that was in a fierce fight with an overwhelmingly massive snake. The serpent had managed to coil itself tightly around the lion’s neck, and as it steadily squeezed with more and more force, the lion was on the verge of suffocating. The king then acted quickly and managed to slay the snake with his sword, thus saving the lion from certain death. This lion henceforth never for a moment forgot his benefactor. From that day it not only followed the king everywhere he went, but it also served as his hunting dog, and when the king would go hunting, this lion would catch various wild animals and bring the prey to him. This continued for a good length of time until, one day, when Godfrey embarked on a journey by ship and left the lion behind on the land. When the lion saw its benefactor board the ship, it became very anxious and began to yelp and whimper. As the ship set sail and began to distance itself from the harbor, the lion started to cry out and leap about. Realizing that it would be left behind, it raced and dove into the ocean in an attempt to reach the ship; however, it was unable to do so, and ended up drowning half-way there.

Saint Ambrose of Milan also relates the following event:

One night, a certain man murdered another person who had a dog that would faithfully follow him everywhere he went. After its master was slain, this dog stood and guarded his body the entire night. In the morning, many people gathered around the corpse, wondering who could have possibly committed this

crime. The murderer himself also turned up, cunningly acting startled and pretending to have no knowledge of this event. As soon as the dog saw the killer, however, it immediately recognized him, it began to bark viciously at him, and, as if it had suddenly become rabid, it pounced on him repeatedly. When the people present witnessed this, they suspected that this person may be the actual culprit. After pulling the dog away from him, they interrogated this man, and having confirmed their suspicion, they handed him over to the authorities.

If irrational animals have so much love for their masters on account of the small amount of food they provide to them, why should we become more insensitive than dogs? Indeed! Nothing is worse than ungratefulness.

They who are foolish do not acknowledge that the good things they possess have been given to them by God, but rather believe that they have acquired them through their own competence and power, thus rendering worship to themselves as if to an idol. Ungrateful wealthy people state that they became rich on account of their hard work and skillfulness. Similarly, ungrateful people attribute their health to their dietary choices and exercise regimen; their good looks to the genes inherited from their parents; their achievements and awards to their praiseworthy proficiency and deserving accomplishments. To say it simply, they never thank God, nor do they acknowledge the grace and blessings they receive from His divine goodness—from where all good things originate.

Let us acknowledge all the good things our Creator and Savior gives us. Let us exclaim along with Saint John of Damascus: “How shall we repay the Lord for all the blessings He has given us? On account of our corrupted nature, God became man and dwelt amongst us. The Savior came to them in captivity; the Benefactor came to the ungrateful ones; the Sun of righteousness came to them in darkness. He Who is boundless hung on the Cross; He Who is Life underwent death; He Who is Light descended into Hades, becoming the resurrection of them who had fallen.”

Let us thank, bless, and praise the Lord, the One and only triune God, our Creator, our Savior, and our magnanimous Benefactor, Who made the heaven, the earth, and the sea, and Who created everything contained therein. We thank You, O Lord, for bringing us into existence out of nothing, and for giving us this great, big universe to serve us. You gave us the earth to produce a variety of fruits and crops; the sun and the moon to provide us with light; the oceans, lakes,

and rivers to provide us with food and water. Furthermore, we worship, glorify, and endlessly thank You for Your love and compassion; for renewing and refashioning the human race; for voluntarily becoming poor, accepting mortality, and embracing suffering, You Who are rich, eternal, and unchanging. You not only did all this for us, but You even chose to endure death in order to grant us immortality and restore us to our initial glory. We also thank you for the paramount offering of Holy Communion, through which we commune and partake of Your divine grace. On account of all these blessings, and the countless others gifts You impart to our souls and bodies daily, we thank You, we worship You, simultaneously appealing to Your compassion and beseeching You not to deprive us of Your Heavenly Kingdom; rather, through Your inherent goodness, deem us worthy of glorifying You, the One Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, along with Your angels and all Your faithful servants, unto the unending ages. Amen.