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St. Raphael, Springdale, AR

There's a wonderful old saying that goes: "You never know what you have until you lose it." But every once in a great while we beat those odds, and do appreciate what we have before it's gone. This happened to me during my vacation to India. You see, I got to travel to India with my parents, and for once I got to have them all to myself. You know, usually when they come up to Springdale, they really come to see the grandkids, Noah, Isaac, Sophia and Isabella, and I'm just a side show. They ask: "Fr. John who?" But not while we were in India! We spent two weeks together, visiting family, reminiscing over the past, and praying together in church. Not only did I realize how fortunate I was to have these great parents, but I also saw that God had chosen them for me; they were His blessings to me. You see, every now and then we beat the odds and see what blessings we have received before we lose them, and we remember to thank God for them.

In the gospel today we see how rarely we see our blessings and how we fail to thank God for them. Jesus cures ten men suffering from leprosy. As they go to show themselves to the priests they are all healed. Now, even though they all know that they've been cured, only one comes back to thank Jesus. Sadly, only the Samaritan realized *where* his miraculous cure came from and he returned to give thanks where it was due. You see, often we fail to recognize our blessings, and even when we do finally see them, we don't remember to thank God for them.

You all know that another word for the Mass is “Eucharist.” But do you know what “Eucharist” means? It’s a Greek word that means “thanksgiving.” In other words, every Sunday we come to church to tell God “thanks” for all the ways He’s blessed us this past week. But there are fewer and fewer Catholics coming to Mass on Sundays. Back in 2004, the USA Today newspaper reported that from 1987 to 1999, the Mass attendance of Catholics dropped from 44% to 37%. Here at St. Raphael’s, we have over 14,000 registered parishioners. Now, this church seats 850 people, and so if everyone came to Mass every Sunday, we’d have to celebrate 13 Masses for everyone to be able to attend! Now, in some ways I’m glad that not everyone comes to Mass! But look around at the pews today: is this church full? Are there even 850 at this Mass? In other words, we’re not doing much better than the lepers in the gospel today in terms of how many Catholics realize their blessings come from God, and return to tell Him thanks.

My friends, we all know that we are blessed. We have our health, at least we were able to get out of bed today. We have our family, and maybe even have great parents like I do. Most of us have more than enough material things: a home, a car, clothes, entertainment, plenty of free cheesecake! But do we realize whom these blessings come from? They come from God, and it’s the least we can do to come every Sunday and tell Him, “thanks.”

Let me tell you about someone who didn’t have any of the things we have, and still remembered to thank God. Archbishop

Francis van Thuan was a bishop in Vietnam when the Communists took over. He was thrown into solitary confinement for 9 years. He wrote a book about his experience in prison. He said: “Many people ask me, ‘Were you able to celebrate Mass in prison?’ When I answer ‘yes,’ I already know the next question: ‘How were you able to get the bread and wine?’ When I was arrested, I had to leave immediately, with empty hands. The next day, I was allowed to request in writing the things I needed most: clothes, toothpaste. I wrote to my addressee: ‘Please, could you send me a bit of wine, as medicine for my stomach?’ The faithful understood what my request meant; they sent me a small bottle of wine for Mass, labeling it, ‘stomach medicine,’ and some hosts sealed in a dehumidifying torch. The police asked me, ‘Do you have a bad stomach?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ They said, ‘Here’s a little medicine for you.’ I will never be able to express my immense joy: Every day, with three drops of wine and one drop of water in the palm of my hand, I celebrated my Mass.”

The bishop continued: “It depended on the situation, however, on the boat that brought us north, I celebrated at night and the prisoners around me received communion. In the reeducation camp, we were divided into groups of fifty people; we slept on common beds, having the right to fifty centimeters-width of bed space. We arranged it so that there were five Catholics with me. At nine-thirty, the lights were turned off and everyone had to sleep. It was then that I would curl up on the bed to celebrate Mass, by memory, and distribute communion, moving my hand under the

mosquito netting. We made little containers from the paper of cigarette boxes to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus in the Eucharist was always with me in my shirt pocket.”

Here was a bishop who had almost nothing, and yet he didn't want to miss even one day of telling Jesus “thanks” by celebrating the Eucharist. My friends, every day be sure to count your blessings. And then, every Sunday give thanks where it is due.

Praised be Jesus Christ!