

Thanksgiving questions (Nov. 12, 2017)

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the civil observance of Thanksgiving in 1863. Yes, that was during the war. It was intended as a harvest festival, a continuation of practices that were 200 years old in what became U.S. territory.

But the day also reflects a religious significance. Since the word Eucharist means “giving thanks,” many parishes have the tradition of a low-key holiday Mass with special prayers. Some churches encourage bringing some of the Thanksgiving food for a blessing, returning it to homes for the festive meal.

We are thankful for many of the same things: that members of our family are still speaking to one another; health; a new child; gainful employment; meaningful courses at school; an armed services member who is safe, maybe even at home with us.

Let me suggest another source of thanks. Back when cars had metal bumpers, we saw stickers that proclaimed, “Jesus is the answer.” Years later, I was reading Swiss Reform theologian Karl Barth who wrote in the 1930s: “Jesus is the question.” His sentiment meshes nicely with the Catholic theology of prayer. Prayer is a response to God’s initiative. God always makes the first move, and should not be imagined as a mere respondent.

St. Augustine’s quote in the Catechism of the Catholic Church is instructive at paragraph 2560: “Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.” And paragraph 2561, citing several Scriptures, teaches us: “Prayer is the response of faith to the free promise of salvation and also a response of love to the thirst of the only Son of God.” So I am thankful that Jesus is the question that draws me to him and to fuller living.

Having said this much, that we don’t move God to act, it follows that Jesus the question is countercultural: News reporters shape the direction of interviews, survey questions shape our responses to their purposes. And we ourselves love to control the source of questions. Evidence for our propensity comes in the form of Google, Explorer, Chrome, Alexa and Siri, which are titles for computer search engines.

Today there are respectable reasons why we would want to build Jesus’ teachings into issues discussions: immigration, capital punishment, human trafficking, reducing opioid addiction, racism, lab production of babies, climate change, income disparity, war threats involving North Korea and political gerrymandering.

But to see Jesus as the question gives a fuller, richer, more gracious idea of our Christian faith. Why? Because it elevates us to Jesus’ heart and spirit, an often overlooked feature of his presence. I know this from experience. I have turned to the Lord in perplexity or discouragement, only to have him communicate that I am working on the wrong question. It is difficult to let go

of our preoccupations if we are not interested in the Lord's redirecting our energy, priorities and vocations.

Reading Jesus' words is something we can do for ourselves. Listening to his heart is something we can do — should want to do — for others. This was a takeaway from the Year of Mercy, our celebration of the loving kindness of Christ in God.

If Jesus were saying grace around our Thanksgiving tables, and I do hope we invite him, what sort of prayer might he offer? Might he raise up an issue, a question that our family is avoiding at great cost? Would he instruct that our family gathering will go better if we avoid discussing religion or politics? His own recorded meal conversations say otherwise.

We live in a time when many are tempted to settle for traditions over hearts. Human aspirations and sufferings are not always helped by a stock of clichés or Google-generated answers. Let's ask Jesus to help us to use our talents to illuminate life and death questions (we don't have to look far), and for the grace to wrestle with them.

Historian David McCullough said in a speech this fall at Boston College that it is our questions that separate us from the cabbages. Let's at least be thankful for that!