

# FAITH MATTERS

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# RADICAL GRATITUDE

BY KATHRYN JEAN LOPEZ



**GLORIA STEINEM  
UNINTENTIONALLY  
PROMPTS  
REFLECTION AND  
THANKSGIVING.**

“Gratitude radicalized me.”

Back in December, some of us stopped in place and fell to our knees. I happened to be at a conference with many friends, colleagues, and admirers of Princeton professor Robert P. George, when we learned he was in the hospital with heart trouble, and it did not sound good. We prayed. We were not alone. Robby is one of those people, like the late Justice Scalia, who are irreplaceable. (Of course, each of us is, if we only knew it and treated one another that way.) Our public and intellectual world wouldn't be the same without him. Even with the tremendous legacy Professor George has created by mentoring young academics and activists, the loss of the man himself would run deep.

He's long back at work now. And I thought of him when a comment that feminist icon Gloria Steinem made on Bill Maher's show resurfaced after Lands' End inexplicably made an unforced error by profiling her for its spring catalogue. (When you think “practical family clothing” — and school uniforms! — bra burning in the Seventies isn't the first image that comes to mind.) What this reminded me of was her

comment, a few weeks ago now, that “gratitude never radicalized anybody.”

She was talking about trailblazing and Roe v. Wade and Hillary Clinton running for president. She infamously got in trouble during that interview for explaining away young women supporting Bernie Sanders as simply being where the boys are.

Steinem's comment about gratitude lingered because it struck me as so very wrong. And I felt for her, too, because, truly, gratitude can change everything — how we look at ourselves, one another, and the world.

**BOUNDLESS  
GRATITUDE CHANGES  
YOU. IMAGINE LIVING  
THAT: BOUNDLESS  
GRATITUDE.  
THAT'S RADICAL.**

When Robert George found himself in the hospital with a life-threatening condition, he was overwhelmed with prayer. “The news quickly became public, and people began praying for me. Not just my family and close friends. Not just people of my own faith. But also people I've never met. And people of virtually every faith. People who were praying for me flooded my e-mail box with messages.” George is Catholic, and he got a call from Cardinal Dolan, but he also got one from an elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of



IMAGE VIA YOUTUBE

Latter-Day Saints, “to say that the entire Latter-Day Saints community worldwide was praying for me.” He got word from ultra-Orthodox Jews in New Jersey, historically black churches, Baptists, Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, evangelicals, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Baha’is, and Muslims who were praying for him, too.

George is a leader in the defense of traditional marriage — work that, in recent years, could be a thankless task. But these people who were praying for him, despite theological differences, all saw the importance of a unified family. “My reaction to all of this was pure, unadulterated, overwhelming gratitude — gratitude to God,” George reflects. “Not only for my survival, but for the good people who, moved by their devotion to Him, offered their

prayers for me. And gratitude to them. Boundless gratitude to them.”

Boundless gratitude changes you. Imagine living that: boundless gratitude. That’s radical. That’s the witness of the families of the Coptic Christians beheaded last year. Those families give thanks for their loved one’s lives and faith, while they pray for the conversion of their murderers.

The outpouring of love from people Robby George didn’t know — and would otherwise never have known he had any kind of impact on — “radically changed my life,” George tells me. “Because of their prayers and God’s goodness, I now understand every day as a gift. No burden, no disappointment, no difficulty changes that. What’s more, in the spirit of gratitude I now see

that prior to my illness I spent far too much of my time focused on myself. I thought of myself as someone who lives much of his life for others, but I'm now struck by just how little of my life I did actually live for others. Don't get me wrong. I'm still a sinner and fall short. I'm still not nearly as selfless as I should be. But at least I now understand — deeply, existentially, not merely notionally — that it makes no sense to live one's life for oneself. The only truly sane way to live one's life is for others. Radically."

Chad Pecknold, a professor of theology at Catholic University, watched the Steinem–Maher interview and observes that Steinem "speaks to a culture that is bored." That struck me as a bit of an explanation for the Lands' End move. As if they didn't even realize what an insult that would be to loyal customers — featuring a woman whose recent book is dedicated to the man who performed an abortion on her when she was 22. Pecknold sees sorrow in the boredom, and he sees that the anger Steinem is trying to drum up could only ever be a temporary cure.

Looking around and really, truly giving thanks — being overwhelmed by gratuitous love — that's the blessed place where Robert P. George now finds himself. I passed by him as I looked for a pew at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception right before the Mass for

Justice Scalia, and I couldn't help being calmed by the presence of a man at peace. Gratitude does that.

**PEACE.  
THAT'S AS RADICAL  
AS YOU GET  
IN OUR DIVIDED,  
SCATTERED,  
SHATTERED  
WORLD.**

"So don't tell me that gratitude never radicalized someone," George tells me. "Every morning when I brush my teeth and look at the guy in the mirror, I see someone who was radicalized by gratitude. For which, I must say, I am radically grateful."

For someone like Steinem, who sees herself as a political radical, gratitude could be a radical de-radicalization. We are not the ones we have been waiting for. As Father Aquinas Guilbeau from the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., puts it, gratitude uproots us "from pride and self-centeredness." It "requires a recognition of the debt we owe to others, which, touching the most important things in life — like life itself — is a debt we cannot repay."

To which my only reply is: "Thanks be to God." To the Creator we owe a debt — and at least the responsibility of good stewardship of His good gifts. It's the ultimate in revolutionary thinking.



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