



Thanksgiving during tough times

On October 3, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation inviting his fellow citizens to "... in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens."

President Lincoln called for giving thanks for a year that was filled "with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies" and also because in the middle of a brutal civil war "peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union."

He ended the proclamation by asking all Americans to pray for "the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine pur-

poses to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union."

At a time when a cold, dark cloud is covering Puerto Rico, we definitely need time for this kind of prayer and reflection. The consensus is that 2009 has not been a particularly good year for Puerto Rico: our economy remains stuck in a recession; unemployment hovers around 16 percent; bankruptcies are up 26 percent; the murder rate has skyrocketed; the government is insolvent and is firing thousands of workers; there is labor unrest and signs of low-intensity social turmoil; the H1N1 virus presents an epidemic threat ... and so on and so forth.

In addition, hardcore ideologues from both the left and the right are running around full of paranoid intensity and seem to dominate the current public debate: the former want to soak the rich, while the latter advocate for the most unenlightened forms of capitalism possible. Some people see *Chavistas* or Hugo Chávez supporters hiding in the bushes, lying in wait to take your property; while at the same time



Sergio M. Marxuach
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others claim the island is run by a nefarious capitalist cabal led by the Elders of Hato Rey. Of course, both positions are hogwash, based on a superficial understanding of our situation and neither provides rational policy alternatives. Vicious diatribes in favor of crucifying the wealthy or calling for the elimination of all labor regulations, may win accolades from fellow travelers in union halls or make for entertaining chatter over cocktails at the Banker's Club, but they make poor policy and are no substitute for hard-headed thinking.

Amid it all, the year-end Holidays and the wide array of emotions they evoke have snuck upon us. The net result is a feeling of what French

philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy calls a "suspended apocalypse." Everybody is waiting for closure, for a resolution, for a new beginning. Some believe everything will work out fine in the end, while others believe we are dangerously close to the abyss of social disintegration.

There is something to be said for the latter perspective, because, again, in the words of Bernard-Henri Levy, "nothing is more fragile, precarious and quick to disintegrate than a well-established social bond — as French poet Paul Valery wrote, 'All that holds it together is magic' — you start off with a financial crisis, then the whole cloth begins to unravel little by little: at the beginning you have a terrified crowd, and at the end, a lynch mob."

Yet, despite or perhaps because of all the gloom, it is quite fit and proper, as Lincoln said, to give thanks for those gifts product of the "ever watchful providence of Almighty God." The fundamental reason for giving thanks is simply because the Lord giveth. In the words of former Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin, this "world is very simply not ours, at best we

are guests." We have been entrusted with all the goods and resources of the Earth, yet we should realize we own nothing. Our duty is to be thankful to God for this undeserved bounty; our lifetime obligation is to act as good stewards and preserve those resources for future generations.

It is easy to thank God for the nice things, the pleasant things. It takes an act of faith to thank God for the hard providences. In this sense we do well to remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap grace," which is automatically accessible to human beings, and "costly grace," which requires hard work, discipline, and sacrifice. Perhaps we in Puerto Rico should be thankful for the opportunity to earn our costly graces. So, on Thanksgiving Day, I invite you to take the time to think about the joys and reflections of the season and, above all, to simply and plainly give thanks.

The author is Director for Policy Development at the Center for the New Economy, a Puerto Rico-based think tank. www.grupocne.org.