

Celebrating Thanksgiving



Here is the origin of Thanksgiving Day, as well as decoration suggestions, grace before and after the dinner, and an explanation of the perfect thanksgiving, which is the Mass.

DIRECTIONS

It looks like a happy coincidence that our American feast of Thanksgiving should come at the end of the Church year where properly a thanksgiving ought to come, but actually it is no coincidence at all. The Pilgrim's feast was another manifestation of the sense of God that is common in all men, and the need they have for giving thanks to Him. Everywhere men have had thanksgiving feasts to whatever gods they worshipped, celebrating their harvests, the end of their journeys, and their protection under a divine providence. For thousands of years before a rite and feast of thanksgiving was dictated in the Law of Moses, their forms appeared everywhere, out of the instinct of man. After the Exodus, the One True God made it a law for the Jews.

Three times every year you shall celebrate feasts to me: Thou shalt keep the feast of the unleavened bread. . . . And the feast of the harvest of the firstfruits of thy work. . . . The feast also in the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in all thy corn out of the field. (Exod. 23:14-17)

Perhaps Elder Brewster held this in mind when he and Governor Bradford and the others planned the Pilgrim prayer meeting and the feast of thanks to follow. God gave explicit instructions to the Jews.

Thou shalt celebrate the solemnity also of tabernacles seven days, when thou . . . make merry in thy festival time, thou, thy son, and thy daughter, thy manservant and thy maidservant, the Levite also and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow that are within thy gates. Seven days shalt thou celebrate feasts to the Lord thy God in the place which the Lord shall choose; and the Lord thy God will bless thee in all thy fruits, and in every work of thy hands, and thou shalt be in joy (Deut. 16:13).

For the Pilgrims, the "stranger within the gates" was Massasoit and some ninety of the Wampanoags who had helped the Pilgrims clear ground, plant crops, and hunt game that first difficult year. There were fatherless and widows, you may be sure: of the original one hundred and two, only fifty remained, twenty-nine of them women and children, some with familiar names, some with strange. There were the Carvers and the Bradfords and the Allertons, Priscilla Mullins who would marry John Alden, and Myles Standish in charge of their military affairs. The Hopkins children were Constantia, Damaris, and Oceanus, and among the other children were Desire Minter, Resolved White, Humility Cooper, Love and Wrestling Brewster and a baby named Peregrine White who was born on the *Mayflower* and probably never knew he bore the name of a half dozen martyrs. Governor Bradford and Elder Brewster had been with the original group who left Scrooby in England, went to Leyden in Holland, and finally set out for the new England.

They were Bible-living Christians, no more tolerant of the religious convictions of others than the Church of England was of their own, but neither is that new under the sun. Even with the ancient form of worship unrecognizable after its truncation, limping after its dismemberment, the instinct to worship is still common; if there is a meeting point left anywhere, this it is. This is the beginning point of the struggle for unity among men who two hundred years before would have offered in thanksgiving "from among Thy gifts bestowed upon us, a victim perfect, holy and spotless, the holy bread of everlasting life and the chalice of everlasting salvation."

We must not think of ourselves as islands of "tolerant" men, worshipping in the way that is most pleasing to each. There is a true way, taught by One Who said, "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life." We must go all the way in our desire to bring all men to His Way, meeting them where we can meet them, sharing warmly with them at least the desire to give some kind of praise, some kind of thanks.

They marched to the fort to the roll of drums, held prayer meeting, sang Psalms in thanksgiving, then gathered round the festive tables. Massasoit and his people brought five deer as their offering. Governor Bradford sent Pilgrim men to the forest with Indians to hunt wild turkey, and they brought down wild geese, duck and water fowl as well. The women cooked cod and shell fish, prepared barley loaves, corn bread, and vegetables from the harvest of their tiny fields.

These are the things our children learn in school about this great national feast of Thanksgiving, and they love to hear the stories that go with the preparations. It is part of our history. Tell them, if they do not know, that George Washington made it a national feast by proclamation in 1789, with words of homage to the One True God:

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly implore his protection, aid and favors. . . . Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, Who is the Beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind

care and protection of the people of this country, and for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer on us.

And in 1867 Abraham Lincoln reaffirmed the observance by another Thanksgiving proclamation.

If they should visit Plymouth one day, they would find the William Harlow house there, built in 1677 from the timbers of the old fort, where in the springtime Plymouth school children follow the Pilgrim custom and plant in the yard corn and flax, 'when the oak leaves are the size of a mouse's ear.' The corn is fertilized with alewives from Town Brook, three to the hill. Let them mark the calendar in their own kitchen, for April or May or whenever the oak leaves peek out, mouse-like, in your countryside, and plant some corn and flax of their own. They may not spin the flax, but it has a beautiful blue blossom, exactly the color for bouquets for Our Lady; and once they know the plant they will begin to notice how often flax and fine linen and linen cloth are mentioned in their favorite stories from Holy Scripture.

Preparing for the Feast

Pine cone turkeys are made for Thanksgiving by almost every schoolchild in America. Although no novelty, they are one of the symbols of the feast. Our children never tire of making them. They are decorative as place favors, or all together (if you have a large family with a turkey for each) they are an amusingly large flock of turkeys. Pine cones, pipe cleaners, cupcake papers and crayons are the materials. The pine cone is used "sideways," with the top for the turkey's head, the flat bottom part for his tail. A pipe cleaner is twisted around the top. The end sticking out as the turkey's neck is daubed with lipstick for red wattles. Another pipe cleaner is twisted around the bottom, with two ends sticking out and turned under for feet. A cupcake paper is folded in half, colored bright colors in the little ridged sections, and this is slipped between the petals of the cone for the turkey's tail.



Several years ago we typed out individual copies of a "long" *Grace before Meals*, Monica decorated them with little figures praying, and we have used these each year as our special Thanksgiving *Grace*. They are a bit greasy now, what with all those turkey dinners rubbed off on them; but they have become so traditional a part of our Thanksgiving that we are loath to make new copies. Since it may be used at any time, it is not accurately called *Grace before Thanksgiving Dinner* — but that is what it is for our family.

Father. Bless ye.

All. Bless ye.

Father. The eyes of all hope in Thee, O Lord.

All. And Thou gives them their food in due season. Thou openest Thy hand, and fillest with blessing every living creature.

Father. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

All. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Father. Lord, have mercy on us.

All. Christ, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us. (*The Our Father, silently.*)

Father. And lead us not into temptation.

All. But deliver us from evil. Amen.

Father. Let us pray. Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive.

Through Christ, Our Lord.

All. Amen.

Grace after Thanksgiving Dinner

(*Suggestion:* Say this as soon as all are finished with dessert; then the children may leave to play, and the grownups may stay and talk.)

Father. Do Thou, O Lord, have mercy on us.

All. Thanks be to God.

Father. Let all Thy works, O Lord, praise Thee.

All. And let all Thy Saints bless Thee.

Father. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

All. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Father. We give Thee thanks, O Almighty God, for all Thy benefits. Who livest and reignest world without end.

All. Amen.

Now we are prepared for our feast. Dinner is planned; the silver is polished; the linen is ready; the Grace is copied for each one. The turkeys are made for decorations; the cranberry sauce is molded; the stuffing is prepared, and the sauce for the onions; and the celery is crisping ahead of time. When the morning of our feast day has come, let us offer *Him* in Thanksgiving.

The Mass: The Perfect Thanksgiving



Men have not only prayed in thanksgiving, but have offered in thanksgiving: something that was a sign of themselves, to show they were thankful for life, were sorry for their sins against the Giver of life, would give their lives in return, if they might, to the One they owe so much. They made offerings in thanks for the things that sustain life, for the preservation of life.

"Abel also offered of the firstlings of his flock, and of their fat." . . . "So Noe went out, he and his sons, his wife and the wives of his sons . . . all living things went out of the ark. And Noe built an altar unto the Lord: and taking of all cattle and fowl that were dean, offered holocausts upon the altar. . . ."

They made bloody offerings, because the offering is a symbol of the offerer, and blood is the essence of life. Blood is life.

There were other offerings. . . . "Melchidesech, the king of Salem, bringing forth bread and wine, for he was the priest of the most high God, blessed him and said: Blessed be Abram by the most high God, who created heaven and earth." . . . Because bread maintains life, and wine enhances life.

God told them what to sacrifice, and how to sacrifice; but especially He told them to make the sacrifice of the Pasch, because it was a memorial to their freedom and their protection, a memorial of thanksgiving to the God who loved them. ". . . and it shall be a lamb without blemish, a male, one year . . . and the whole multitude of the children of Israel shall sacrifice it in the evening." . . . "And this day shall be a memorial unto you: and you shall keep it a feast to the Lord . . . for with a strong hand the Lord hath brought you out of this place."

He brought them through water, led them by fire, fed them with manna, and when they sinned against Him, He chastised them and accepted their sacrifices of expiation. He made it part of their Law, their Covenant, that they were to offer sacrifice: of reparation, of petition, of praise, of thanksgiving.

Then Christ came.

When it was time for the thing to happen for which He came, He said to the Apostles: "This is My body, which is being given for you; do this, in remembrance of Me."

And He said: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which shall be shed for you."

This was the *new* covenant, the *new* Pasch . . . "in *My* blood," He said. From that moment on they were to make sacrifice "in *My* blood."

The offering is a symbol of the offerer. Blood is the essence of life. This is our gift to offer: His Body and Blood, every day.

Think of all the things the Redemption accomplished, and do not forget this last: to put into our hands the perfect Gift, the pure Victim — "holy and spotless, the holy bread of everlasting life and the chalice of everlasting salvation."

With the sacrifice of Holy Mass, Catholics make their thanksgiving.

Activity Source: *Year and Our Children, The* by Mary Reed Newland, P.J. Kenedy & Sons, New York, 1956

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