

Thanksgiving

CELEBRATING
WITH A THANKFUL
HEART

Thanksgiving Day is a holiday that is among the nation's finest national traditions. Indeed, setting a day aside for giving thanks to God is not just a U.S. phenomenon as many countries worldwide celebrate harvest festivals that express gratitude to God.

For Christians, Thanksgiving Day has special meaning, for we know that gratitude lies at the very heart of discipleship. A grateful heart heralds the beginning of discipleship and opens the way to our deepest response, the desire to return to God for the bounty of our lives.

For what do we thank our Creator? The early American colonists, who gave inspiration to the Thanksgiving Day tradition were thankful for their very survival. Many of their compatriots were buried in the soil of their new land, far from all that had been cherished and familiar.

It's natural to thank God when things seem to turn out the way we had hoped, when disaster is averted, when life seems filled with abundance. Harder, perhaps,

is the ability to thank God for being present to us in times of struggle, failure, illness and death. But, in the heart of the Christian, the memory of God's presence is a comfort and a gift all its own.



If we take time to reflect on our lives, we often discover that we are most grateful for a gift we struggled to receive. Often we find that what has come to us in the form of hardship has in hindsight revealed itself as gift. This is why each day's struggles and trials should be met with a heartfelt "thank you."

Meister Eckhart, a 14th century Dominican mystic, wrote, "If the only prayer you ever say is 'thank you,' that will suffice." At first, this might seem puzzling. What of praise and petition? But Eckhart knew that the most genuine response, and indeed, the first and most spontaneous response of the heart which has discovered God, is "thank you." Gratitude lies at the beginning of true prayer.

As we reflect on this time of thanksgiving, let us be present to those moments when God's gifts were hidden in shadow and remember to be thankful for all.



THANKSGIVING DAY & THE CHURCH

A Brief Summary

Give thanks to the
LORD, who is good,
whose mercy
endures forever.

—Psalm 106:1

I give thanks to my
God always on your
account for the grace
of God bestowed on
you in Christ Jesus,
that in him you were
enriched in every way,
with all discourse and all
knowledge.

—1 Corinthians 1:4-5

For everything
created by God is good,
and nothing is to be
rejected when received
with thanksgiving, for it
is made holy by the invoca-
tion of God in prayer.

—1 Timothy 4:4-5

In all circumstances give
thanks, for this is the
will of God for you in
Christ Jesus.

—1 Thessalonians 5:18

Let us come before
God with a song of
praise, joyfully sing-
ing out our psalms.
For the LORD is the
great God, the great
king over all gods.

—Psalm 95:2-3

Harvest festivals thanking God for favors received are common among all cultures and religions. Ritual feasts of thanksgiving to Yahweh were a vital part of the Israelite religion, which had two thanksgiving festival periods, one in the spring and one in the fall.

The Church has never had a feast dedicated to thanksgiving—likely because thanksgiving is already an integral part of all liturgical celebration. But in the late Middle Ages in Europe, thanksgiving themes became part of the feast day of St. Martin on Nov. 11.

The history of Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. reveals that the observance was primarily Protestant in its origins, and that wide Catholic recognition and acceptance of the holiday came late.

Traditionally, the first Thanksgiving was thought to be a festival in the fall of 1621 at the Pilgrim settlement in Plymouth, MA. Pilgrim settlers and Native Americans celebrated a good harvest. By the 1660s, some New England communities were holding a Thanksgiving feast annually, but it was not until two centuries later that Abraham Lincoln set the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day.

By the late 1800s, some Catholic priests forbade parishioners to celebrate what seemed to them a public Protestant festival. However, Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore allowed it.

During the 1900s, Catholics were marking Thanksgiving Day as many others were, with private family meals and celebrations, and, less so, by attending parades or other public events.

It was not until 1969 that the American Bishops Committee on the Liturgy prepared and published Lectionary readings and prayers for a Mass specifically for Thanksgiving Day.

