

Reflections

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THANKSGIVING – AN AMERICAN TRADITION

Thanksgiving each year is the time when America's religious roots and traditions are publicly displayed and observed. While we think of feasting on abundant food and drink, and imagine the Pilgrims in Plymouth Colony in 1621 inviting neighboring Indians to join them in a celebration for a plentiful harvest, Thanksgiving Day has a much more religious meaning. It was not uncommon in the 17th and 18th centuries for individual colonies to set aside days for prayers of gratitude to our Lord.

In 1671, the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts proclaimed June 29 “as a day of Solemn Thanksgiving and praise to God for such his Goodness and Favor.” Several times during the Revolutionary War, at the request of the Congress, General George Washington issued General Orders for days of prayer. On November 30, 1777, he ordered that “Thursday the 18th day of December next be set apart for Solemn Thanksgiving and Praise; that at one time, and with one voice, the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their divine benefactor; and that, together with their sincere acknowledgements and offerings they may join the penitent confession of their sins; and supplications for such further blessings as they stand in need of.”

Similar declarations followed. On October 11, 1782, the Continental Congress set aside “THURSDAY the twenty-eight day of NOVEMBER next, as a day of solemn THANKSGIVING to GOD for all his mercies” In 1789, the first year of his Presidency, Washington designated Thursday, November 26 as a day for “prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations” both in thanksgiving for His “signal and manifold mercies” and to request Him to “pardon our national and other transgressions.” President James Madison three times proclaimed days of prayer and fasting during the War of 1812, first petitioning God's assistance and then to thank Him for a successful outcome.

During the Civil War, the Congresses of both the Union and Confederacy called for days of thanksgiving for military victories, with declarations issued by Presidents Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. On October 3, 1863, Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for the observance of the last Thursday of November “as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens” for His “singular deliverances and blessings” and “with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience.”

The date for Thanksgiving was not fixed, but left to the President to designate. Since Lincoln selected the last Thursday in November, however, this date became the tradition for succeeding Presidents. In 1939, as there were five Thursdays in November and in response to a request from business leaders for more shopping days before Christmas, especially as the effects of the Depression still lingered, President Franklin Roosevelt selected the next to last Thursday as Thanksgiving. There was a great outrage as Roosevelt kept it as this earlier date for the next two years. In 1941, Congress enacted that the holiday would be celebrated, as it is currently, on

the fourth Thursday of November. In spite of commercial concerns for moving the date, Roosevelt kept the purpose of Thanksgiving very much in mind. In 1942, he called on the American people to observe both Thanksgiving and New Year's Day "in prayer, publicly and privately."

The tradition of a national declaration of gratitude to God continued, with every President issuing a proclamation annually since 1863. In 1953, President Eisenhower requested that "all of us" gather on Thanksgiving Day in "our respective places of worship and bow before God in contrition for our sins, in supplication for wisdom in our striving for a better world, and in gratitude for the manifold blessings He has bestowed upon us and upon our fellow men."

President Reagan, in 1984, requested: "Let us pause from our many activities to give thanks to almighty God for our bountiful harvests and abundant freedoms. Let us call upon Him for continued guidance and assistance in all our endeavors. And let us ever be mindful of the faith and spiritual values that have made our Nation great and that alone can keep us great." In 2004, President George W. Bush stated: "We are grateful for our freedom, grateful for our families and friends, and grateful for the many gifts of America. On Thanksgiving Day, we acknowledge that all of these things, and life itself, come from the Almighty God."

While these public prayers have been called proclamations of thanksgiving, they have expressed much more than gratitude over the years. As all prayer, they have been used to *petition* God for assistance, to *thank* Him for his mercy and abundance, to *atone* for our personal and national sins, and to *adore* Him as the "Lord and Ruler of Nations." These declarations are an overt recognition that while America has a secular government, religion is an integral part of the nation's culture and society.

On November 22, we will celebrate Thanksgiving. It will be a day marked by parades with marching bands, floats and balloons, by football games from morning until late evening, by tables of food and drink that surpass our capacity to consume, and by the beginning of a month-long marketing blitz seeking our consumer dollar. While we enjoy the camaraderie and festivities of the day, do not forget its central purpose – to thank God for His innumerable blessings on us, our families, and our nation. What an expression of Faith it would be if all Knights could begin the day with Mass, say more than a perfunctory prayer, and perhaps, just perhaps, decline that extra piece of pie.



Washington in prayer