

ORIGIN OF OUR THANKSGIVING DAY

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St. Paul urged us to give thanks to God always. Our forebears and our founding fathers, active Christians, often followed this sage counsel. And eventually our national day of Thanksgiving evolved.

The very first Thanksgiving was celebrated on September 8, 1565, in what is now St. Augustine, Florida, by Spanish settlers and Timucua Indians. On that day the first Mass, an act of thanksgiving, was celebrated on American soil, and it was followed by a feast of bean soup.

Another Thanksgiving was observed in El Paso, Texas, under the leadership of Spanish explorer Don Juan de Onate, who declared: "In the name of the Most Holy Trinity...I take possession of this whole land this April 30, 1598, in honor of Our Lord Jesus Christ, on this day of the Ascension of Our Lord" Mass was celebrated and a feast of geese, cranes, and ducks was enjoyed by the colonists, followed by a play organized by the Franciscan missionaries honoring the Native American converts.

Another interesting note concerns Squanto, the Native American who helped the Puritan pilgrims and Native Americans arrange at Plymouth Rock in 1621 what is the historical forerunner of our Thanksgiving. Squanto had previously been captured and enslaved by the English, but was freed by the Spanish Franciscans, and was baptized a Catholic. Thus, a Catholic contributed to arranging our Thanksgiving Day.

Thanksgiving is one of the most loved and honored American holidays. Some travel considerable distances to spend this day with family. Spending time with family is surely a special blessing. But it is important to remember that Thanksgiving is much more than turkey, stuffing, and football. Unlike other secular holidays like Labor Day and the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving is a

national holiday that is clearly religious in nature. As a nation of faith with Christian foundation, we set aside this day to thank God for his many blessings.

During his first year in office, 1789, President George Washington called for a day of Thanksgiving because “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 to implore his protection and favor.”

In 1815 President James Madison issued a proclamation for “a day of thanksgiving and of devout acknowledgements to Almighty God for his great goodness.” But after Madison Thanksgiving reverted to a regional celebration in the New England states for 48 years.

During the Civil War a concerned magazine editor, Sarah Josepha Hales, petitioned the Lincoln administration in 1863 that a day of Thanksgiving “now needs national recognition and official fixation to become permanently an American custom and institution.” That year President Abraham Lincoln called on Americans to “fervently implore 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 purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”

Thoughts to ponder this Thanksgiving. Thanks be to God!