

**Homily for Thanksgiving Day Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

November 25, 2021

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here to observe our American holiday devoted to Thanksgiving. It is also good for us to recall the roots of this celebration.

The American celebration of Thanksgiving is religious in origin. Governor William Bradford proclaimed the first Thanksgiving Day in 1621 to give thanks to God for the Pilgrims' safe voyage across the ocean, for surviving a harsh winter, for a rich harvest and for their new native American friends. It was a feast that was shared by all the colonists and their native hosts. According to *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* ". . . the customary turkey dinner is a reminder of the four wild turkeys served in the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving feast."

It was not only a time for sharing and good fellowship. It was a time for thanking God, and that theme has remained the focus of this special holiday over the centuries. Few people realize that the Pilgrims did not

celebrate Thanksgiving the next year, or any year thereafter, though some of their descendants later made a "Forefather's Day" that usually occurred on December 21st or 22nd. The Continental Congress in 1777 proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving.

Several Presidents made one-time Thanksgiving holidays. Our first President, George Washington, proclaimed a national day of thanksgiving on November 26, 1789. He recommended that Americans devote the day "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 all then unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for his kind care and protection . . ."

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made Thanksgiving a national holiday. On October 3, 1863, in the midst of our tragic Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln revived what is now an annual tradition of issuing a presidential proclamation of Thanksgiving. President Lincoln asked God to "heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and Union." Acknowledging the many blessings that we constantly enjoy, President Lincoln proclaimed:

“It has seemed to me fit and proper that these gifts should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. I do, therefore, invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday in November as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwells in the heavens.”

In celebration of Thanksgiving Day 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “Rarely has any people enjoyed greater prosperity than we are now enjoying. For this we render heartfelt and solemn thanks to the Giver of Good; and we seek to praise Him -- not by words only -- but by deeds, by the way in which we do our duty to ourselves and to our fellow men.”

On December 26, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a bill into law passed by Congress making Thanksgiving a national holiday and settling it on the fourth (but not final) Thursday in November. Thus we continue this great national tradition today, one of the few holidays when people of all faiths and religions can share in the same purpose and customs of the celebration.

The Gospel passage today (Lk 17:11-19) goes particularly well with today's first reading and especially our celebration of Thanksgiving. Saint Luke consistently reminds us that Jesus is determined to make the journey to Jerusalem. Those who meet Him, follow Him, listen to Him, and obey Him; they are healed, enlightened, and then change their lives. They are saved.

Luke highlights the favor Jesus bestows on someone outside the People of Israel. This person is a Samaritan, an enemy of the Jews. Although Jesus heals ten lepers, this Samaritan is the only one who "sees" that he has been cured. He becomes known for what he does after his encounter with Jesus: He returns to Jesus to offer thanks and praise. Luke often notes that amazement and thanksgiving are the appropriate response to meeting Jesus.

Jesus praises the Samaritan's example and adds yet another dimension to his healing. This man had been labeled a foreigner and a leper. He was not among the Chosen People. But now he has a new identity as healed, grateful, and saved. Jesus clearly has the power to heal. More importantly, we have the power to accept salvation gratefully and humbly.

Every preface at Mass begins, "It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father,

almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord.” Then we state why we are thankful. Later, we hear how Christ, the night before he died, took the bread, took the chalice, raised his eyes to heaven, blessed the elements of bread and wine, “giving thanks, broke the bread and gave . . . once more giving you thanks . . . gave the chalice.”

We gather here to do what Jesus did: to give thanks to God for all his gifts, especially for the saving paschal mystery accomplished by Jesus. In this Eucharist, our central act of thanksgiving, we then, as St. Augustine said centuries ago, “receive what we are and become what we receive.” We receive the Body of Christ, and become more deeply the Body of Christ.

What are the implications of so great mystery? We are to be a eucharistic people, a people of thanksgiving, a people who live Eucharist by pouring our lives out for others.

Today is our national day of Thanksgiving; gathered here, we are grateful for the blessings of life in this country. The words of the Preface today name the gift: “You have entrusted to us the great gift of freedom, a gift that calls forth responsibility and commitment to the truth that all have a fundamental dignity before you.” Not a freedom to do “whatever,” but a freedom that is ours because Christ redeemed us from sin.

Our lives must always be marked by gratitude, by being grateful in thought, word, and deed—like the Samaritan leper who alone returned to give thanks and to praise God. St. John Chrysostom wrote that the gifts we receive from God greatly exceed the grains of sand on the seashore.¹

The Tenth Declaration of our Fourth Diocesan Synod declared, “As a Diocese committed to discipleship and stewardship, the community of Catholic faithful recognizes that everything we have comes from God and that He has given us gifts not just to use them for ourselves but also to share them with others. As faithful and generous stewards of God’s abundant gifts, those committed to discipleship and stewardship as a way of life pledge to share their talents, give of their time and contribute proportionately from their financial resources for the good of the Church and those in need.”

Stewardship has been defined as “the grateful response of a Christian Disciple who recognizes and receives God's gifts and shares these gifts in love of God and neighbor.”² The best way we can show our thanks to God for the gifts He has given us is for us to give back generously to Him and His Church.

Later today most of us will sit down to share some sort of Thanksgiving dinner. Yet today's holiday is not primarily about the meal that will be served in our homes. Today's primary feast is the spiritual food that we receive here at Mass as the foretaste and promise of the heavenly banquet promised to those who follow our Lord. Last week the Catholic Bishops of the United States approved a teaching document on *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*.³ I pray that this will help the Christian faithful to grow in their understanding of and appreciation for the Eucharist. In our prayers of thanksgiving today, may our greatest gratitude be for the generous gift that Our Lord has given of Himself to us in the Eucharist. Partaking of this Eucharist gives us the courage to live a life overflowing with thanks, not just today, but every day of our lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. Matthew's Gospel*, 25, 4.

² Catholic Diocese of Wichita, <https://catholicdioceseofwichita.org/stewardship/>.

³ [The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church.pdf \(uscgb.org\)](#), November 2021.