

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

**November 24, 2022**

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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 each year 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 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup>. 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.

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. 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.

Later, in the Eucharistic Prayer, 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.

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.

Yesterday was the Memorial of Saint Clement, who reigned as Pope from 88-97 AD. In his Letter to the Corinthians, Pope Saint Clement wrote about God's gifts, for which we should be grateful. He wrote:

Beloved, how blessed and wonderful are God's gifts! There is life everlasting, joy in righteousness, truth in freedom, faith, confidence, and self-control in holiness. And these are the gifts that we can comprehend; what of all the others that are being prepared for those who look to him? Only the Creator, the Father of the ages, the all-holy, knows their grandeur and their loveliness. And so we should strive to be found among those who wait for him so that we may share in these promised gifts. And how is this to be, beloved brothers? It will come about if by our faith our minds remain fixed on God . . .

This is the path, beloved, by which we find our salvation, Jesus Christ, the high priest of our sacrifices, the defender and ally in our helplessness. It is through him that we gaze on the highest heaven, through him we can see the reflection of God's pure and sublime countenance, through him the eyes of our hearts have been opened, through him our foolish and darkened understanding opens towards the light, and through him the Lord has willed that we should taste everlasting knowledge. He reflects God's majesty and is as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

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. 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.