

THANKSGIVING DAY

2007

Psychologists have long understood the importance of holidays for human beings. Regularly scheduled and predictable days, which mark specific events in the course of human affairs, are crucial to who and, indeed, what we are.

The marking of events puts our existence into a context: we did not just appear here on earth. We do not exist in a vacuum; we have a past, we fit in to the present, and we trust in God that we have a future.

So important to us is this “context of existence,” as I like to refer to it, that God revealed this context to us in Sacred Scripture. Scripture tells us where and how we fit into God’s creation. It reminds us of the major encounters humans have had with God during the course of history.

And many of those encounters are called to mind annually on days that are so important that we mark them as holy days – from which the term holiday comes. When we mark these special days, we engage in particular rituals, over and over again – both sacred and secular. Mass itself is a sacred ritual which is essentially the same, day after day after day - and it must be so, for religious and psychological reasons. (The psychological reasons behind the necessity of ritual is really sufficient material for a full report of its own).

And so today, we find ourselves at still another special day, during which we will engage in many rituals. Many, such as yourselves, always begin Thanksgiving Day with Mass. Then you proceed to the other things, year after year: football games, the Macy’s parade – either in person or on TV, visits to family and friends, etc.

We even have ritualistic foods on this day: turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, apple cider, apple pie, pumpkin pie, and so on. Many of these are foods which are abundant in the Fall, a special season we are also marking or noting at this time of the year.

Unfortunately, for some, Thanksgiving Day marks nothing more than the start of the Christmas shopping season. People forget that when the American writer Sarah Hale campaigned for a national day of Thanksgiving, she envisioned a special day, which would occur each year, when the good people of the United States would pause, and as a group, give thanks to God from whom all blessings flow.

And in 1863, Abraham Lincoln helped realize her dream: he established Thanksgiving so that we will give both thanks and praise to God for all He has bestowed on this country. Thanksgiving Day helps to put our existence as Americans and creatures of God into a proper context – a context which helps us realize that the material blessings we have been given as a country are ours only because of Divine Providence; not because of anything we have done.

The day, of course, memorializes the Pilgrims who were so persecuted for their Puritan religious practices in England, that they come to the New World to find freedom.

During the course of their many struggles in the New World with the land and the weather, disease and backbreaking work, the Pilgrims never forgot that all they had, despite the hardships involved, was from God. And so, their governor, William Bradford, put their experiences into a fuller context when he proclaimed a special day of ‘thanksgiving’ to God. Two hundred years later, Abraham Lincoln made the day official.

We can see then, that putting all our experiences into a context of existence, helps us find the true meaning of what we do as we live out the life God has given us; we also find a semblance of order in what can sometimes seem like a disorderly and chaotic existence.

So...take time to put today into its proper context: before you and your family and friends enjoy Thanksgiving dinner, or begin watching the parade or football game, be sure to take some time to truly thank God in prayer and thought for all He has given us and our nation. And then, ask Him to help make you grateful – not just in word, but in deed also.

God bless you today and always!