

[Readings: Sirach 50:22-24, Psalm 138, 1 Cor. 1:3-9, Luke 17:11-19]

The first Thanksgiving: A walk through the history of the holiday of gratitude uncovers its Catholic roots by [Michael R. Heinlein](#) *OSV Newsweekly*

The very heart of Christian worship takes its name from the Greek word expressing gratitude. “Eucharist” means “thanksgiving.” It goes without saying, then, that thanksgiving is a rather significant aspect of what the Mass is all about. And there is no real separation of church and state where the celebration of Thanksgiving is considered. Citizens of the United States have celebrated Thanksgiving, at least informally, since before the country’s inception. Both the Mass and the celebration of Thanksgiving Day call to mind the very necessary reality that, as human beings, we are made to give thanks.

What is the reason for our thanksgiving? The late Archbishop of Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, OMI, put it best: “Recognizing that none of us is self-made and unwilling to declare ourselves a cosmic accident, we turn to the Author of all that is and say thanks. In the face of a gift that cannot be matched in return, all one can do is be grateful.”

And our last words at Mass is our response: “Thanks be to God.” Cardinal George explained their significance, saying that “Gratitude to God shapes our lives, at their beginning and their end. Each moment is a gift; each event unfolds under God’s loving providence.” The challenge for Christians is to live each day in recognition that all is gift — chief among which is our salvation. As St. Paul exhorts us, “in all circumstances give thanks” (1 Thes. 5:18).

In 1789, George Washington declared a day of thanksgiving 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.” Washington set the day aside for Americans to give thanks for their newly established government, but most of all, to render unto God “sincere and humble thanks — for His kind care and protection.” In his thanksgiving declaration, Washington rightfully acknowledged God as “the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.”

Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th president, said similar things in proclaiming Thanksgiving Day a national holiday. It came at a time when brother fought brother in the Civil War. In many ways, Lincoln's 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation reads like a prayer.

Recounting the benefits of a major victory the Union received, Lincoln recognized God alone as the object of a nation's gratitude. He wrote the victories "were the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." And so Lincoln decided to invite all Americans to celebrate Thanksgiving Day on the fourth Thursday of each November — a day set aside to offer "Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens."

It is popular opinion to regard the celebration of Thanksgiving as tracing its roots back to the pioneering Puritan pilgrims of Plymouth Rock who gathered to give thanks for a good harvest in their new North American home. The celebration has religious connotations because these pilgrims sought political asylum to practice their freedom of religion.

But that was 1621. Since history is told by the winners, the English myth prevailed despite a detailed account of a thanksgiving feast celebrated over half a century earlier. The [Thanksgiving of 1565](#) was celebrated in what is now St. Augustine, Florida. Of course, the Spanish colonizers who hosted it were Catholic, and they gave thanks to God, as Catholics do, for their safe passage and arrival in the New World. Not only did they celebrate with a meal of gratitude that day, but they also celebrated what is regarded as the first Mass in America.

And so as your family celebrates Thanksgiving this year, don't forget that most historians agree that it really [started in America as a Catholic celebration](#). But, most importantly, remember the holiday's origins. No matter if you believe it was started by Washington, Lincoln or Spanish colonialists, it has always been clear that God is the reason we give thanks.

Marcus C. Grodi, a convert to Catholicism and host of EWTN's "The Journey Home," adds this. The best of recipes minus a single key ingredient falls far short on the palate. And the same is true in our walk with God.

So you say your spiritual life seems lacking. You try to maintain a healthy spiritual diet, following all the directions as best you can. It's not easy, but you're sure your mind and heart are in it!

Even so, something's wrong. You put on your best face, yet the anxieties, stresses and strains of everyday life always seem to get the upper hand.

Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life!" (Mt 6:25). But you just can't seem to break the hold that worry has on your heart -- for long periods or maybe even for a brief moment. You can't seem to experience the inner peace Jesus promised to all who would follow Him (see Jn 14:27).

In essence, your life with Christ just doesn't taste right, at least not in the way He seemed to promise. Is it possible that some essential ingredient, some necessary "spice," is missing from your spiritual life?

The apostle Paul once passed on a short, foolproof recipe for receiving this inner peace of God. To Christian friends whose spiritual progress was being impeded by concerns about the present and future, he wrote:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, WITH THANKSGIVING, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:4-7).

St. Paul says "with thanksgiving." The only way our hearts can fully turn away from ourselves, to receive the gift of God's peace -- is through the "spice" of thanksgiving. "In all circumstances," St. Paul urged, "give thanks" (1 Thes 5:18). Blessed Fr. Solanus Casey, who was beatified one year ago last weekend, urges us to "Thank God ahead of time," and to "Praise God in all His works." Thanksgiving is much more than an annual holiday. It's a whole way of life. AMEN!