

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

November 26, 2020

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it is good that we gather this morning on a day that we as people of the United States of America observe a holiday devoted to Thanksgiving.

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 1827, Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale began lobbying several Presidents for the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, but her lobbying was unsuccessful until 1863 when Abraham Lincoln finally made it 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.

Today is indeed a national holiday, yet the essence of this day is nothing new for us as Catholics. By our very nature as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are people of gratitude. We acknowledge that all good things in this life come from God and the primary way that we recognize all that the Lord has given to us is the celebration of the Eucharist. We are people of gratitude.

Gratitude is one of the most attractive virtues a person can have, and fortunately it costs us nothing and requires no skill but the habit of common courtesy! Saying “thank you” is a mark of good manners that parents seek to instill in their children as soon as they are able to talk. Today’s national holiday of giving thanks parallels our Christian faith in reminding all of us – not only children – to say thank you to God.

It is fitting that our Gospel passage today (Lk 17:11-19) features an act of gratitude. The Samaritan man returns to the Lord to thank Him for the healing of his leprosy. The Lord is surprised and even disappointed to discover that only one has come back in gratitude. The Lord’s reaction tells

us that when we receive a blessing from the Lord, gratitude is an expectation. The Lord goes on to tell the Samaritan that his faith has saved him. Gratitude was a part of the faith that saved him. Gratitude, then, has a saving power. It saves us from the feeling of self-sufficiency that can lead us away from our dependence on the Lord. It saves us from the feeling of entitlement that makes us averse to serving others.

Gratitude does indeed have a saving power and it is a virtue that, when put into practice, will lead to greater holiness. St. Paul knew this to be true. St. Paul often begins his letters with an expression of gratitude as he does in his First Letter to the Corinthians from our second reading today (1 Cor 1:3-9). He writes, "I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus."

As children, we were taught to say thank you even when we received something we did not necessarily want. That is still the case even for adults. At different times in our life we will be given our share of illness, tragedy and grief. St. Paul says we should give thanks for whatever we receive.

St. Paul provides us an exceptional example of someone who lived the virtue of gratitude in all circumstances. Whether in good times or in

bad, St. Paul gave thanks to Lord. And St. Paul was no stranger to the experience of hardship. He was often thrown into prison, beaten, nearly stoned to death, shipwrecked, and he was regularly persecuted for his preaching. Given all his experiences while still giving thanks to God, how can we fail to show gratitude to the Lord?

As citizens of this nation, yet first and foremost as Catholics, we express our gratitude for all that the Lord has done for us. And we pray for the grace to give back in some way for all that we have received. We seek to give of ourselves as a more profound expression of gratitude, just as Christ gives to us the gift of his very self.

Later today most of us will sit down to share some sort of Thanksgiving dinner, perhaps modified from our usual large family gatherings due to the coronavirus pandemic. 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. 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.