



The History of Thanksgiving

by Richard J. Mendola, Executive Director of IFI

In 1620, the Pilgrims landed in New England. They were deeply grateful to God for delivering them from religious persecution and providing them with religious freedom. In America, they were free to worship God as their conscience dictated and stay true to their personal convictions.

During their first year nearly one-half of the pilgrims died due to sickness and severe conditions. When they had an abundant harvest later in their first year, they were so grateful that they gathered to “render thanksgiving to the Almighty God for all His blessings” as Governor William Bradford explained. This first Thanksgiving Celebration took place in 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The pilgrims invited the American Indians to join them in what turned out to be a three-day celebration. This included foods that have now become a part of our traditional thanksgiving meal: (wild) turkey, potatoes, and corn.

The first National Thanksgiving Proclamation was issued on November 1, 1777 by the Congress. It called for “solemn thanksgiving and praise” on the part of all Americans, so they could “express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of [God] and that together with their sincere acknowledgements and offerings, they may join the penitent confession of their manifold sins...that it may please God through the merits of Jesus Christ mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance.”

On January 1, 1797, President George Washington issued the National Thanksgiving Proclamation. In it he stated:

“It is our duty as a people, with devout reverence and affectionate gratitude, to acknowledge our many and great [debts] to Almighty God and to [ask] Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experienced. Deeply [filled] with this sentiment, I, George Washington, President of the United States, recommend...to all persons whomsoever, within the United States, to set apart and observe February 19 as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, and on that day to meet together and render sincere and hearty thanks to the great Ruler of nations for the [many] mercies which distinguish our lot as a nation....”

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Thanksgiving became an “official” holiday in the USA during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. In the midst of the civil war, he issued a proclamation making it an annual observance. In his proclamation, he wrote:

“We have been the recipients of the choicest [gifts] of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown.

But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

It has seemed to me [fitting] and proper that God 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 those who are sojourning in foreign lands to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to our [kind] Father who dwells in the heavens.”

Thus Thanksgiving became a time to thank God in the midst of difficulties, to remember past blessings, and to acknowledge God as the source of provision. It was a time to humble oneself, praise God and ask for His continued help.