

Thanksgiving and History

I don't know about Catholic-school kids, but those of us who went to public school were, very much, indoctrinated into the Protestant-civic version of the Thanksgiving story: It was all about the Mayflower, and Pilgrims seeking religious freedom, Plymouth Rock, starvation, and rescue by friendly "Indians" who taught them how to plant corn in the gut of a dead fish: And somewhere, embedded in this narrative, was Honest Abe Lincoln.

Like a lot of history lessons, that one served a certain world view and is, therefore, a bit of a revision of the reality. From a Catholic perspective, those "pilgrims," (really "Puritans"), were a stridently anti-Catholic sect from England. They regarded the official Anglican (Episcopalian) religion to be too "Catholic" and wanted to purify the religion of the nation from all things related to our Faith.

Many years ago I took a tour of the Plymouth Plantation with a priest friend. We were both dressed in non-clerical attire. When we went into one of the houses, we encountered a female actress who was portraying one of the settlers. And in the course of talking to us she entered into a rather nasty diatribe against "the Catholics" back home in England. Little did she know to whom she was talking! Knowing full well that it was an act and not a heart-felt sentiment, my buddy and I smiled at each other and moved on. But it did open our eyes to the sort of people we had been reverencing for all these years on the civic calendar. They pretty much reviled the likes of us, and consigned us to a very hot Hell.

According to a variety of sources, that old "public-school" version of Thanksgiving is really a sort of convenient construct. The fact is, settlers of the Jamestown colony of Virginia were known to celebrate "thanksgiving" meals at the time of the harvest well before the Puritans landed at Plymouth. Moreover, the earliest documented version of such feasts were celebrated by (Catholic) Spaniard and French explorers on, what is now, American territory.

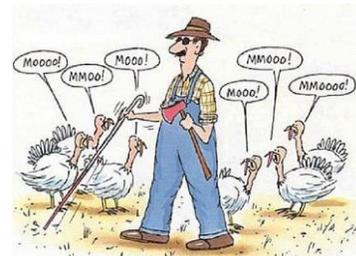
According to Wikipedia, (font of knowledge ☺), the civic celebration goes back to the time of George Washington, and was celebrated

sporadically over the years until it was declared a federal holiday by Abraham Lincoln.

If you are a native Wampanoag, (like the Mashpee, Assonet, or Pocasset people), this holiday is deeply offensive. The native account of the "First Thanksgiving" begins with the notion that the Pilgrims had a great harvest and wished to celebrate. Whereupon, they dispatched some men to go hunting for water fowl to include in the feast. The local Wampanoag heard the gunfire and thought they were being attacked. Massasoit dispatched his warriors to investigate and they came upon the Pilgrims feasting. Whereupon, the Pilgrims, (who had a treaty with the Wampanoag facilitated by an English speaking native named Squanto), invited them to dinner. Not having enough meat for all the warriors, Massasoit had his men hunt for deer to add to the table.

Part of the insult in all of this is that the popular story makes it seem as if the banquet was a mutual arrangement when, in fact, the Wampanoag were not even invited! Much worse, however, many thousands of the native population died from diseases carried by the Europeans, and they were betrayed by some and carried off into slavery.

Despite all of the injustices based on race and religion, perhaps the one area where all parties might find agreement is that the "Source" of all the goods of the harvest and the world is worthy of our thanksgiving. In fact, we Catholics would say "*It is right and just, our duty and our salvation.*" Essentially this was the message of Abe Lincoln when, in 1863, he decreed that Thanksgiving be a federal holiday on the last Thursday of November.



"Thanks," says G.K. Chesterton, "is the highest form of thought." And he mentions the fact that the worst moment for an atheist is when he is thankful and suddenly realizes he has no one to thank.

(<https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/11/23/the-catholic-origins-of-thanksgiving/>)