

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Thanksgiving Day
November 28, 2019

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Look back as far into world history as you can go and you will find groups of people, tribes, and nations, having thanksgiving festivals. They gave thanks on the occasion of harvests or the end of migrations, after victory in battle, or the end of a plague. Giving thanks has always been an instinct in man-made-in-the-image-of-God. Something in him *requires* the giving of thanks. Any anthropologist will tell you that. And they will also tell you that thanksgiving is a *focused observance*. It acknowledges not only that whatever it was that happened was beyond our ability to do. The credit, and therefore the thanks, was attributed to *someone* who made it happen.

The ancient Hebrew people knew Who made it happen. This *Some One* made thanksgiving a *law* for Israel. Almighty God said, “Three times a year you shall celebrate feasts to me; thou shalt keep the feast of unleavened bread...and the feast of the harvest of the first fruits...and the feasts also of the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in all the corn out of the field.” *Exodus* 23:14, 17

That was what the Bible-loving Pilgrims had in mind at Plymouth when in 1621 they planned their prayer meeting and followed it with a harvest feast of thanks. Seventy-five years earlier the parents and grandparents of those same Pilgrims would have offered their thanksgivings using words familiar to any Catholic. “Unto Thine excellent majesty of thine own gifts and bounty, the pure victim, holy and immaculate, the holy Bread of eternal life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation. (from the Canon of the Mass)

The instinct of these men and women to worship and give thanks was preserved. But by 1621 the Pilgrims’ worship was truncated and dismembered as a result of the protestant reformation. The instinct to give thanks went back thousands of years. But then came the *true way* to give thanks, taught by the One Who said, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.” Catholics must work and pray that all people everywhere will go all the way to the One Who *is* the Way.

All history was leading to the *perfect sacrifice* of Jesus Christ. Our ancient forebears had not just prayed in thanksgiving. From time immemorial they also *offered something* as a sign of themselves. They made offerings in thanksgiving for

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the things which gave them life. These people were not Christian theologians! It was all elemental and basic. The things offered included animal sacrifice and sometimes human sacrifice. And the majority of mankind since the dawn of history would be puzzled by the Pilgrim prayer service, containing as it did no representative offering.

But Almighty God was preparing His people for the coming of Christ. And He told the ancient Hebrews *what* to sacrifice and *how* to sacrifice. And “in the fullness of time”, to use St Paul’s phrase, Christ came and He was the perfect sacrificial offering. When the time came for Him to do His decisive work, Jesus Christ said, “This is My Body, This is My Blood; Do this in remembrance of Me.” From that time forward God’s people were to make their thanksgivings *focused on the Lord*, and their sacrifice to re-present the perfect offering of God’s Beloved Son. This is to be the gift of thanksgiving we offer Almighty God: His Body and Blood, every day. The very word **Eucharist** means “to give thanks.”

And in a wondrous exchange, Almighty God is not outdone in generosity! When we receive Our Lord in communion, God puts into our hands the perfect gift we have offered: “the pure victim, holy and immaculate, the holy Bread of eternal life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation.”