

## "GIVING THANKS"

INTRODUCTION In these times, is Thanksgiving really relevant? Or is it becoming, like Christmas, another obligatory feast that depresses people of conscience and fuels the bitterness of the unfed poor?

The questions, at least, are relevant. I have often wished that we had three or four Thanksgiving Days each year. Not simply to remind us of our blessings, but to renew our sense of pity - and outrage - for the unblessed.

This year the unblessed may be numbered in the millions. Some have been standing long hours in the unemployment lines, living frugally, and slowly losing hope. There are the unblessed who are old, and who will be dining alone in drab little rooms next Thursday, or holding out their thick, chipped plates for a slice of turkey at the Salvation Army.

DEVELOPMENT In the Thanksgivings of our childhood, we were all little Pilgrims. Remember how our elders spent all day cooking, feasting, toasting, marveling that the Lord had brought us through another year. We all felt cherished. And we knew we'd grow up remembering the day, bound to honor the feast of a roasted bird and a hot mince pie. Now, within the grim circumference of our time, we feel guilty about it.

Of all our holidays, Thanksgiving seems the most American. It is non-sectarian. It is wreathed in generosity and thankfulness. And no day is so firmly rooted in our colonial past. That bit of history that launched a billion turkeys into an infinite bog of cranberry sauce was set down by one of the Pilgrim fathers in prose that still takes the heart with its innocence:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help, served the company almost a week".

This account does not mention, as Francis Dillon points out in his book, "The Pilgrims" that the Indians fattened the fest by sending five deer. A nice little extra.

If we wish to trace Thanksgiving back through the centuries, we'll find it an essentially pagan feast. When the harvest is home, there must be a harvest-home supper. Like so many holidays, Thanksgiving rises out of something basic and profound in the nature of man.

There was much to do two years ago over an editorial in the National Observer that placed Thanksgiving on the "endangered species" list. The language was blunt.

"Thanksgiving is the one holiday we have left to do what Americans are best at," wrote Douglas Looney. "Gorging themselves without conscience, unnecessarily and inexplicably....Thanksgiving works because it has absolutely no redeeming social value".

One would like to think that "social value" is precisely what Thanksgiving is rich in. Is it not a time of sharing, of praising the Lord for His bounty? And in our rejoicing, do we not give solemn thought to the plight of the needy, the unfed? So goes the litany that shaped our past holidays. But, one wonders, is it still valid? There are some who claim not.

"So love Thanksgiving while you can, folks" he concluded, "Because the government is likely either to move it to August 4th, or to cancel it altogether on the grounds that the Pilgrims were white and Protestant and that's offensive to - well, who, the hell knows?"

That's funny reading, to be sure, but it struck me then - and still does - as a rather graceless conclusion to a fine essay. Re-reading it this past week, however, I am stuck by its relevance - that word again - to the comments that I have been hearing this week about the gluttony of Thanksgiving and the hypocrisy of it.

I think what is hopeful about America today is not this cool cynicism, but the lurking sense of shame over that cynicism. If only our holidays - to borrow a rhyme - could somehow recapture their first fine careless rapture. If only the inequities in our society weren't quite so glaring. If only we hadn't grown selfish growing old.

Once upon a time, reading the stories of how the Pilgrims celebrated that first Thanksgiving, I was awash with pity for their suffering. As Governor William Bradford wrote, they had crossed a vast ocean of trouble and

"They had no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses to repair unto....and the season was winter...besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beats and wilde men?"

Now, in the mellowing ~~years~~ of my middle years, I almost envy those Pilgrims. They had one another, a brave, snug little community. They had absolute faith in their God and in the rightness of their mission. And they were living a high adventure.

Three centuries and a half past and here we are in our holiday guilt, living in a city that many feel is going down, in a country burdened with great social problems, in a century of bright hopes gone to ashes. Will a day of revel and gluttony make us feel better? For a few hours, yes, it probably will - may the unblessed forgive us. When the guests are met and the feast is set, all spirits rise.

We solve no social problems, whether we feast or fast on Thanksgiving. But an American who does not, in some fashion, share his bread and meat, his warmth and his wine, is the most unblessed of all.

I MUST GIVE THANKS

There is a half-forgotten story about an early settlement on the New England shore that is worth remembering. After the first two difficult years, this colony gathered a modest harvest, caught cod aplenty, took venison, had sustantial cabins for shelter. They have even made friends with the Indians. But some people were dubious about the winter ahead, particularly the leaders and a day of prayer and fasting was decreed.

The people gathered, heard a long opening prayer of apology for human weakness and shortcoming. It was followed by a long confession by one of the elders, not only for himself but for the whole community. Others rose to detail the trials of life and own their sins and errors. The meeting droned on and on, till at last a little man stalked forward from the back of the room and said, "I must dissent. I have heard enough of sin and damnation."

A startled gasp went thro gh the room. The little man went on.

"I have fasted till my belly griped, meditated my sins till my mind reeled, asked forgiveness till I was ashamed even for asking. Now" he said, "I must lift mine eyes in thanks, or lift them not at all".

A startled gasp went through the room. Then a sigh of relief.

The little man went on.

"We had privations. Some of us died. We froze and we starved. But now we have a harvest, we have wood for our fires, meat for our eating, clothes to cover our nakedness. Why" he asked, "do we abuse ourselves. What is our sin, beyond the fact that we are still alive".

He lifted his head proudly. "

"let us be done with whimpers and complaints. Let us lift our hearts and thank the good Lord for the things we have and the work we still can do! And let us end this pointless fasting".

A murmur filled the room, a murum of relief. The most eloquent confessors looked abashed. Neighbor turned to neighbor and for the first time that day there were smiles. Life's whole complexion had changed. And within an hour the fire place spits were provisioned and turning, the pots were simmering. Women cooked. Child got underfoot. Men brought plans and set up t bles and benches. Before sundown that day of fasting and prayer had become a day of feasting and thanksgiving for every soul in the colony.

CLOSING

On Thanksgiving Day, most Americans know that we have much to be thankful for as we dwell in a nation at peace and blessed with abundance. But we also know that of those to whom much is given, much is expected. We hunger not for bread but for practical ways to unite the personal and the poli ical, the symbolic and the substantive.

## "GIVING THANKS"

INTRODUCTION In these times there are those who sometimes wonder: is Thanksgiving really relevant? Or, is it becoming, like Christmas, another obligatory feast - secular and sumptuous - that depresses people of conscience and fuels the bitterness of the unfed poor.

The questions, at least, are relevant. I've often wished that we had three or four Thanksgiving Days each year. Not simply to remind us of our blessings, but to renew our sense of pity - and outrage - for the unblest.

This year the unblest may be numbered in the millions. Some have been standing long hours in the unemployment lines, living frugally, and slowly losing hope. There are the unblest who are old, and who will be dining alone in drab little rooms in this city next Thursday, or holding out their thick, chipped plate for a slice of turkey at the Salvation Army. And beyond the borders of our land, hunger remains a way of life for hundreds of millions who are close to the heart of God.

DEVELOPMENT In the Thanksgivings of our childhood, we were all little Pilgrims. Remember how our elders spent all day cooking, feasting, toasting, marveling that the Lord had brought us through another year? We all felt loved, cherished. And we knew we'd grow up remembering that day, bound to honor the feast of a roasted bird and a hot mince pie. Now, within the grim circumference of our time, we feel uncomfortable and guilty about it.

Of all our holidays, Thanksgiving seems the most American. It's non-sectarian. It's wreathed in generosity and embroidered with thankfulness. And no day is so firmly rooted in our colonial past. That bit of history that launched a billion turkeys into an infinite bog of cranberry sauce was set down by one of the Pilgrim fathers in prose that still takes the heart and touches it with its innocence:

"Our harvest being gotten, our governor sent four men on fowling so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help, served the company almost a week".

This account fails to mention, as Francis Dillon points out in his book, The Pilgrims, that the Indians fattened the feast by sending five deer. A nice little extra, you might say.

And if we wish to trace Thanksgiving back through the centuries, we find it an essentially pagan feast. When the harvest is home, there must be a harvest-home supper. Like so many holidays, Thanksgiving seems to rise out of something very basic and profound in the nature of man.

SOCIAL VALUE There was much to do a couple of years ago over an editorial that appeared in the National Observer that placed Thanksgiving on the list of "endangered species". The language was blunt and gave us reason for discomfort.

"Thanksgiving is the one holiday we have left to do what

Americans are best at" wrote Douglas Looney, "Gorging themselves without conscience, unnecessarily and inexplicably. Thanksgiving works because it has absolutely no redeeming social value".

One would like to think that "social value" is precisely what Thanksgiving is rich in. Is it not a time of sharing? Is it not a time of "praising the Lord for His bounty"? Is it not a time for remembering the blessings that are ours? And in our rejoicing, do we not give solemn thought to the plight of the needy, the poor, the unfed, the less fortunate. So goes the litany that shaped our past holidays. But, there are those moments when one wonders if it's still valid. Some claim it is not.

"So love Thanksgiving while you can, folks" he concluded, "Because the government is likely either to move it to the 4th of August, or to cancel it altogether on the grounds that the Pilgrims were white and Protestant, and that's offensive to - well, who, the heck knows?"

That's funny reading, to be sure....but it struck me then, and still does, as a rather graceless conclusion to a fine essay with some disturbing insights. And reading it again this week, I am struck by its relevance - there's that word again - to the comments that I've been hearing in recent days about the gluttony and hypocrisy of Thanksgiving...set against the backdrop of world hunger.

I think what is hopeful about America today is not this cool cynicism, but the lurking sense of easiness and shame over that cynicism. There are people of conscience who remember something Jesus said, "I was hungry and you fed me....as you have done to the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me". If only our holidays - to borrow a rhyme - could somehow "recapture their first fine careless rapture". If only the inequities of our society weren't quite so glaringly apprent. If only we hadn't grown soft and selfish growing old.

FIRST PILGRIMS Once upon a time, reading the stories of how the Pilgrims celebrated that first Thanksgiving, I was awash with pity for their suffering. As Governor William Bradford wrote, they had crossed a vast ocean of trouble and,

"They had no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses to repair unto...and the Season was winter...besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts and wilde men".

Now, in the mellowing of my middle years, I almost envy those Pilgrims. They had one another - a brave, smug, little community. They were close. They had absolute faith in their God and in the rightness of their mission. They were living a high adventure.

Three and a half centuries later and here we are approaching Thanksgiving Day with a sense of discomfort, feeling a bit of guilt, living in a city that has many who are hungry, in a country burdened with great and complex social

problems, in a century of bright hopes that have turned to ashes. We ask,

"Will a day of revel and gluttony  
make us feel better?"

For a few hours, yes....it probably will (may the unblessed forgive us!) For when the guests are met and the feast is set and thanks are given - all spirits rise. As Tom Wicker wrote some time ago,

"Clutter it as we may with indigestion  
and football, it is essentially a time  
of the spirit when we let it be. A  
time of the heart, despite ourselves!"

CLOSING We solve no social problems, whether we feast or fast on Thanksgiving Day. But an American who does not - in some fashion - pause to breathe a word of thanks and share his bread and meat, his warmth and wine, is perhaps the most unblessed of all!

Let us always remember - not only in this season of thanksgiving - that of those to whom is given, much is also expected. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".

PRAYER Lord, light within our hearts in these moments, the flame of gratitude that in a grumbling, complaining world, our light may always shine with joy and praise. Where our thanksgiving cannot be "because" of, let it be, ~~we~~ pray thee "in spite of". Give us thankful hearts. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen