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How Thanksgiving Day Came About

Thanksgiving Day has been celebrated since early in the 17th Century. Our first account comes from a letter written by Edward Winslow to a friend on December 11, 1621. It reads in part:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, so that we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors. The four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest King, Massasoit with some 90 men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others..."

It was not until 1636 that a law was enacted making such celebrations official. The Governor and his Assistants were "to command solemn days of humiliation by fasting, etc., and also of thanksgiving as occasion shall be offered".

Some idea of the bleakness of the New England winter is gathered from Governor Bradford's picture of the plight of the newcomers in 1620, when he wrote: "Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in preparation...they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather-beaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succour..."

The Jesuit Relations gives us a picture of the governor through an account of Father Gabriel Druillettes, S.J., a missionary who toured New England toward the end of 1650, and sent a report to his Provincial in France. Of his visit to Plymouth Father Druillettes wrote: "The governor of the place, named Jehan Brentford received me with courtesy, and appointed me an audience for the next day; and he invited me to a dinner of fish, which he prepared on my account, knowing that it was Friday". This revelation of Bradford's tolerant thoughtfulness and liberalism toward the missionary is an interesting item to keep in mind, when one recalls his adverse criticism of the Catholic Church in the opening chapter of his history of the colony, "Of Plymouth Plantation, By William Bradford, sometime governor thereof". There is no doubt at all that his pen drew the authentic picture of what transpired among the 102 pilgrims who dropped anchor in what is now Provincetown Harbor at sunrise on November 11, 1620.

Thanksgiving Day is the only festival in our time to blend religious and national tradition. It was first nationally proclaimed by Washington after the Union was born. And the first annual observance was proclaimed by Lincoln in 1865. And it was a woman who made the day what it really is -- Sarah Josepha Buell, editor of Godey's Lady's Book. She wrote: "Thanksgiving Day, like the Fourth of July, should be considered a national festival and observed by all our people. When it shall be observed on the same day throughout all the states and territories, it will be a grand spectacle of moral power and human happiness, such as the world has never yet witnessed".

The good lady wrote this persistently; and her dream became a reality ultimately. We have it as such today, assigned to the last Thursday of November. It is also a symbol of American "Good-Neighbor Policy", as expressed in the Pan-American Mass annually celebrated in St. Patrick's Church, in Washington, and attended by the diplomatic corps.

Tomorrow -- Masses in all hall chapels. Late Communion in Dillon chapel until 9:30.
Furthermore - it will be much more comfortable; and you'll do a better job with a Mass than the Pilgrim Fathers ever dreamed of.