

# Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Reflection

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## Thanksgiving Day

America 's Thanksgivings in recent years have been Thanksgiving with a difference. We are grateful, very grateful, but many certitudes we enjoyed in the past have been overshadowed with elements of insecurity. The United States , land of the free, is not exempt from the burdens borne by so many people in the rest of the world. Our freedom, like all earthly freedom, carries with it a terrible fragility. That fragility was always there, but our awareness of it was not. Many recent events have turned minds and hearts into a search to comprehend human motives, religious aspirations, and moral justifications when horrors are inflicted.

We look back on the history of Thanksgiving Day, how it came about, the people who are characters in the drama. The first chapter takes place in England . In 1609, a group of Christians, who call themselves Pilgrims, sail away from persecution to the more tolerant shores of Holland . But they do not like the effect of Dutch culture on their children and decide to move on. They will make a much more hazardous voyage to the New World . There they will establish a community based on high religious standards. A financial arrangement with merchant backers pays their way in exchange for seven years of labor in their new setting.

Here is a beginning fraught with possibilities of danger. On Sept. 6, 1620, nine weeks behind schedule, the Pilgrims set sail on the Mayflower and endure 66 cold damp days. The wooden ship cannot allow fire so all the food is eaten without heat. A baby boy, Oceanus, is born at sea. Illness is pervasive and one person dies. Land appears at Cape Cod, but the final choice for a settlement is Plymouth . A chilling winter with exceptional onslaughts of sleet and snow reduces the 110 Pilgrims and crew to less than 50. America 's founding is cemented with human grief, great loss of life, and religious hopes. All of this we are experiencing today.

At last the warmth of spring draws near. An Abanaki Indian, walking into the settlement, at first frightens the survivors. His name is Samoset and he calls out , "Welcome." He had learned English from fisherman in his native Maine . Samoset returns with a second brave named Squanto who is much more fluent in English and has been baptized a Christian. With Squanto's tutoring, the Pilgrims are taught to tap maple trees for sap, to plant corn and other crops. The October harvest is abundant and calls for rejoicing. Governor William Bradford, who will be re-elected 30 times, proclaims a feast of Thanksgiving. The celebration of colonists and 90 Indians lasts three days.

The Pilgrims, known as Separatists to denote their secession from the Church of England, were Congregationalists. Not all of the colonists adhered to their form of Christianity, and contention between opposing parties could have ruined the chance to survive. Instead the Mayflower Compact allowed all signers to take part in making laws with the acceptance of the majority's rule.

Looking at that first Thanksgiving, we see how much it was shaped by gratitude to God and also by the recognition that our fellow human beings may not echo our own religious tenets. We are all children of God but praise of our Creator takes many different forms. The melody of my hymn, so familiar to me, may sound strange in other ears. Did the Puritans recite, "Trust in the Lord and do good that you may dwell in the land and enjoy security" (Ps 37:3)?

The followers of Islam, like us, have Abraham as Father. They esteem Jesus while we go much further and worship Him as the Son of God. These are profound differences but they should not stir either side to rise up against the other.

When we pass a mosque or see someone in garb unfamiliar to us, we remember the diverse signatories to the Mayflower Compact happily greeting Chief Massasoit and members of his Wampanoag tribe. In dress and speech the feasters seem alien to one another; yet all are together at a table that includes duck, geese, turkey, venison, shellfish, eels, watercress and corn. The Native American men and women eat together. English women stand behind the table until their menfolk are finished. There are games and races, marching and drum playing. Indians show their skill with bow and arrow. We see a vision of peace among those who were dissimilar in so many ways. Human life is being celebrated even as the memory of those who died from illness makes for grieving. "How precious is Your kindness, O God. The children of mortals take refuge in the shadow of Your wings ...with You is the fountain of life and in Your light, we see light" ( Ps 36:8,10).

To take life away in the name of God is to distort our very being, twisting our humanity out of shape. "To You, O Lord, I cried out: What gain would there be from my lifeblood, from my going down into the grave?" (Ps 30:10). No gain is achieved through plotting to deprive our fellow creatures of their right to live. Christ gathers in the victims with arms of love as those who deserved not the swift ending of their days on earth. We are called, as the Pilgrims were, to join in the warmth of celebration with others. We see those who pass by us, whatever clothing they wear, as sisters and brothers. "If we walk in light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another " (1 Jn 1:7).

Christ spreads a table before us and all human beings--each one the work of God's hands--are invited to come together. We are not rivals. "O magnify the Lord with me. Let us exalt God's name together" (Ps 34:3). Enmity drains our resources on every level. The most important ingredient in any feast is peace and that peace is bestowed on us as God's gift. "My covenant was one of life and peace" (Mal 2:5). Unhappily sometimes holidays can bring to the fore a festering division in a family. Human beings make up the fabric of community and we cannot always repair a tear in the material. But when we can, God's blessing comes upon us to clothe us anew in love and friendship. Then we go happily to the feast to partake of nourishment for body and spirit. The author of Ephesians writes, "I kneel before the Father from Whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name; and I pray that God will bestow on you gifts in keeping with the riches of divine glory" (Eph 3: 14, 15).

Those gifts come to us when we recognize every other human family as children of God. "May Your Way be known upon earth, among all nations Your saving power .... May the nations be glad and sing for joy... for You guide the nations upon earth" Ps 67:3,4). On Thanksgiving Day, we chant our gratitude to God and ask others to join our song. God made every human heart to be a bearer of peace in the small sphere

of a local area and beyond. As followers of Jesus, we try to repair all dissension while we look ahead to the eternal banquet when we shall sit down together and be grateful for one another. **"For still the vision has its time, presses on to fulfillment and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it. It will surely come" (Hb 2:3).**

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