

Men of Saint Michael

“Iron sharpens iron, as one man sharpens another”

Proverbs 27:17.



Newsletter



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Editor: Victor R. Claveau, MJ

Tel: (727) 378-4361 — E-mail: claveau@earthlink.net

All Saints Day

All Saints Day is celebrated at slightly different times around the world. In the UK, this day has moved recently from the 1st of November, to the nearest Sunday. In the dioceses in the United States, All Saints Day is celebrated on November 1.

In the early days of the Church, Christians celebrated the anniversary of a martyr's death at the place where they died. In the fourth century, neighboring dioceses began to share feasts, and to join in a common commemoration. During the persecution of Diocletian, the number of martyrs became so great that a separate day could not be assigned to each. But the Church, felt that every martyr should be venerated so a common day for appointed for them all.

At first only martyrs and St John the Baptist were honored by a special day. Other saints were added gradually, and increased in number when a regular process of canonization was established. As early as 411 there was in the Chaldean Calendar a 'Commemoratio Confessorum' for the Friday after Easter. In the West. Pope Boniface IV, consecrated the Pantheon in Rome to the Blessed Virgin and all the martyrs, in May 609 or 610. Gregory III (731-741) consecrated a chapel in the Basilica of St Peter to all the saints and fixed the anniversary for 1 November. Gregory IV (827-844) extended the celebration on 1 November to the entire Church. The octave was added by Sixtus IV (1471-84).

The solemnity in honor of all the saints, demonstrates the great honor and respect that we render to holy men and women of the past. Honoring the saints reminds us of our goal of attaining heaven as a reward for our efforts in living the Gospel taught to us by Jesus.

The saints are examples of the life that is lived in the spirit of the Gospels. This spirit is that of the Beatitudes as proclaimed in the Gospel reading of the day (CF. Matthew 5:1-12):

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain,
and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him.
He began to teach them, saying:*

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land.
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the clean of heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you
and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me.
Rejoice and be glad,
for your reward will be great in heaven."*

These spiritual principles summarize how to live a meaningful Christian Life.

Each of us can look to our patron saints and to those saints for whom we have some special admiration for inspiration and example. These saints are our brothers and sisters, who are in a very real communion with us, and who can strengthen us by their intercessions, since we are on the same journey, which they have completed.

Their triumph is a source of our joy; their glory is our eager expectation.

The solemnity celebrates God's great triumph in the multitude which no one can count. It celebrates God's glory, wisdom, honor and power. This feast is also the community's day to praise God who began a great work in us on the day of our baptism, when we were washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. We pray this day that with God's help and the intercession of the saints, we will bring to completion the great work He has begun in us, and that we will arrive at God's throne to sing His praise forever.

All Souls Day

The practice of keeping a memorial day for the dead did not begin with Christianity; such a commemoration was prevalent in pagan antiquity. But as early as the second century Christians commemorated the anniversary of the dead, especially the day of death of the martyrs. The liturgical observance of a single day for the dead dates to the seventh century and it is known that St Isidore of Seville encouraged it. The monks of Cluny set the date as November 2, the day following the feast of All Saints, and in the fourteenth century Rome accepted this practice. The custom of offering three masses on this day began in Spain in the fifteenth century. It was Pope Benedict XV who extended this privilege to the entire Church.

The tone of today's celebration is a paschal one, because Christ's paschal mystery gives meaning to the death of the faithful Christian.

The Entrance Antiphon for the first of three sets of prayers for the Masses for this day quotes two verses from the letters of St Paul:

"Just as Jesus died and rose again, so will the Father bring with him those who have died in Jesus. Just as in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be made alive (I Thess. 4:14; I Cor. 15:22).

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus, and belief in our own resurrection should convince us to take life seriously. Death is not something that we as Christians face with fear, it is not a threat to existence. If we understand it as the necessary prelude to resurrection, then it will help us to determine how to live. We will then look upon our time in the mortal life as a series of opportunities for believing hoping loving, and growing. All moments are unique and will not be repeated.

Our destiny, has been designed by the same Father who raised up Jesus from death He wants us to join his Son in glory where we will live with more intensity than ever before, and forever. Like the feast of All Saints it is a feast of God's triumph It is a celebration of the victory of Jesus over death, and "a promise that we will one day enjoy the vision of God's glory in the kingdom where hope is firm for all who love and rest is sure for all who serve." (Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ, in Scripture in Church, v. 15, n. 60, p. 403; this sermon is drawn to a great extent from the text).

Perhaps today we will be more conscious of the communion of saints as we pray for our departed loved ones. Today's feast gives us an added dimension to our prayers for them; when we pray for them we experience this communion of help and of companionship. We can be aware, too, that we are also making our way to fulness of life and happiness in Jesus. That life is the gift that he has won for us all.

On this day may the God of all consolation "bless us with faith in the resurrection of his Son, and with the hope of rising to new life. To us who are alive may he grant forgiveness, and to all who have died a place of light and peace." (Cf. Solemn Blessing).

To Trace All Souls Day

Fr. Brian Van Hove, S.J.

As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once said so well, one major difference between Protestants and Catholics is that Catholics pray for the dead:

"My view is that if Purgatory did not exist, we should have to invent it." Why?

"Because few things are as immediate, as human and as widespread—at all times and in all cultures—as prayer for one's own departed dear ones." Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva, had a woman whipped because she was discovered praying at the grave of her son and hence was guilty, according to Calvin, of superstition". "In theory, the Reformation refuses to accept Purgatory, and consequently it also rejects prayer for the departed. In fact, German Lutherans at least have returned to it in practice and have found considerable theological justification for it. Praying for one's departed loved ones is a far too immediate urge to be suppressed; it is a most beautiful manifestation of solidarity, love and assistance, reaching beyond the barrier of death. The happiness or unhappiness of a person dear to me, who has now crossed to the other shore, depends in part on whether I remember or forget him; he does not stop needing my love." [1]

Catholics are not the only ones who pray for the dead. The custom is also a Jewish one, and Catholics traditionally drew upon the following text from the Jewish Scriptures, in addition to some New Testament passages, to justify their belief:

Then Judas assembled his army and went to the city of Adulam. As the seventh day was coming on, they purified themselves according to the custom, and they kept the sabbath there. On the next day, as by that time it had become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kinsmen in the sepulchers of their fathers. Then under the tunic of every one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin. [2]

Besides the Jews, many ancient peoples also prayed for the deceased. Some societies, such as that of ancient Egypt, were actually "funereal" and built around the practice. [3] The urge to do so is deep in the human spirit which rebels against the concept of annihilation after death. Although there is some evidence for a Christian liturgical feast akin to our All Souls Day as early as the fourth century, the Church was slow to introduce such a festival because of the persistence, in Europe, of more ancient pagan rituals for the dead. In fact, the Protestant reaction to praying for the dead may be based more on these survivals and a deformed piety from pre-Christian times than on the true Catholic doctrine as expressed by either the Western or the Eastern Church. The doctrine of purgatory, rightly understood as praying for the dead, should never give offense to anyone who professes faith in Christ.

When we discuss the Feast of All Souls, we look at a liturgical commemoration which pre-dated doctrinal formulation itself, since the Church often clarifies only that which is being undermined or threatened. The first clear documentation for this celebration comes from Isidore of Seville (d. 636; the last of the great Western Church Fathers) whose monastic rule includes a liturgy for all the dead on the day after Pentecost. [4] St. Odilo (962-1049 AD) was the abbot of Cluny in France who set the date for the liturgical commemoration of the departed faithful on November 2.

Before that, other dates had been seen around the Christian world, and the Armenians still use Easter Monday for this purpose. He issued a decree that all the monasteries of the congregation of Cluny were annually to keep this feast. On November 1 the bell was to be tolled and afterward the Office of the Dead was to be recited in common, and on the next day all the priests would celebrate Mass for the repose of the souls in purgatory. The observance of the Benedictines of Cluny was soon adopted by other Benedictines and by the Carthusians who were reformed Benedictines. Pope Sylvester in 1003 AD approved and recommended the practice. Eventually the parish clergy introduced this liturgical observance, and from the eleventh to the fourteenth century it spread in France, Germany, England, and Spain.

Finally, in the fourteenth century, Rome placed the day of the commemoration of all the faithful departed in the official books of the Western or Latin Church. November 2 was chosen in order that the memory of all the holy spirits, both of the saints in heaven and of the souls in purgatory, should be celebrated in two successive days. In this way the Catholic belief in the Communion of Saints would be expressed. Since for centuries the Feast of All

the Saints had already been celebrated on November first, the memory of the departed souls in purgatory was placed on the following day. All Saints Day goes back to the fourth century, but was finally fixed on November 1 by Pope Gregory IV in 835 AD. The two feasts bind the saints-to-be with the almost-saints and the already-saints before the resurrection from the dead.

Incidentally, the practice of priests celebrating three Masses on this day is of somewhat recent origin, and dates back only to ca. 1500 AD with the Dominicans of Valencia. Pope Benedict XIV extended it to the whole of Spain, Portugal, and Latin America in 1748 AD. Pope Benedict XV in 1915 AD granted the "three Masses privilege" to the universal Church. [5]

On All Souls Day, can we pray for those in limbo? The notion of limbo is not ancient in the Church, and was a theological extrapolation to provide explanation for cases not included in the heaven-purgatory-hell triad. Cardinal Ratzinger was in favor of its being set aside, and it does not appear as a thesis to be taught in the new Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church. [6]

The doctrine of Purgatory, upon which the liturgy of All Souls rests, is formulated in canons promulgated by the Councils of Florence (1439 AD) and Trent (1545-1563 AD). The truth of the doctrine existed before its clarification, of course, and only historical necessities motivated both Florence and Trent to pronounce when they did. Acceptance of this doctrine still remains a required belief of Catholic faith.

What about "indulgences"? Indulgences from the treasury of grace in the Church are applied to the departed on All Souls Day, as well as on other days, according to the norms of ecclesiastical law. The faithful make use of their intercessory role in prayer to ask the Lord's mercy upon those who have died. Essentially, the practice urges the faithful to take responsibility. This is the opinion of Michael Morrissey:

Against the common juridical and commercial view, the teaching essentially attempts to induce the faithful to show responsibility toward the dead and the communion of saints. Since the Church has taught that death is not the end of life, then neither is it the end of our relationship with loved ones who have died, who along with the saints make up the Body of Christ in the "Church Triumphant."

The diminishing theological interest in indulgences today is due to an increased emphasis on the sacraments, the prayer life of Catholics, and an active engagement in the world as constitutive of the spiritual life. More soberly, perhaps, it is due to an individualistic attitude endemic in modern culture that makes it harder to feel responsibility for, let alone solidarity with, dead relatives and friends. [7]

As with everything Christian, then, All Souls Day has to do with the mystery of charity, that divine love overcomes everything, even death. Bonds of love uniting us creatures, living and dead, and the Lord who is resurrected, are celebrated both on All Saints Day and on All Souls Day each year.

All who have been baptized into Christ and have chosen him will continue to live in Him. The grave does not impede progress toward a closer union with Him. It is only this *degree* of closeness to Him which we consider when we celebrate All Saints one day, and All Souls the next. Purgatory is a great blessing because it shows those who love God how they failed in love, and heals their ensuing shame. Most of us have neither fulfilled the commandments nor failed to fulfill them. Our very mediocrity shames us. Purgatory fills in the void. We learn finally what to fulfill all of them means. Most of us neither hate nor fail completely in love. Purgatory teaches us what radical love means, when God remakes our failure to love in this world into the perfection of love in the next.

As the sacraments on earth provide us with a process of transformation into Christ, so Purgatory continues that process until the likeness to Him is completed. It is all grace. Actively praying for the dead is that "holy mitzvah" or act of charity on our

part which hastens that process. The Church encourages it and does it with special consciousness and in unison on All Souls Day, even though it is always and everywhere salutary to pray for the dead.

ENDNOTES:

[1] See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, with Vittorio Messori (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 146-147. Michael P. Morrissey says on the point: "The Protestant Reformers rejected the doctrine of purgatory, based on the teaching that salvation is by faith through grace alone, unaffected by intercessory prayers for the dead." See his "Afterlife" in *The Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1993) 28.

[2] Maccabees 12:38-46. From *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Catholic Edition. (London: The Catholic Truth Society, 1966) 988-989. Neil J. McEleney, CSP, adds: "These verses contain clear reference to belief in the resurrection of the just...a belief which the author attributes to Judas ...although Judas may have wanted simply to ward off punishment from the living, lest they be found guilty by association with the fallen sinners.... The author believes that those who died piously will rise again...and who can die more piously than in a battle for God's law? ...Thus, he says, Judas prayed that these men might be delivered from their sin, for which God was angry with them a little while.... The author, then, does not share the view expressed in 1 Enoch 22:12-13 that sinned- against sinners are kept in a division of Sheol from which they do not rise, although they are free of the suffering inflicted on other sinners. Instead, he sees Judas's action as evidence that those who die piously can be delivered from unexpiated sins that impede their attainment of a joyful resurrection. This doctrine, thus vaguely formulated, contains the essence of what would become (with further precisions) the Christian theologian's teaching on purgatory." See *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, SS, et al., art. 26, "1-2 Maccabees" (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990) 446.

[3] Spanish-speaking Catholics today popularly refer to All Souls Day as "El Día de los Muertos", a relic of the past when the pre-Christian Indians had a "Day of the Dead"; liturgically, the day is referred to as "El Día de las Animas". Germans call their Sunday of the Dead "Totensonntag". The French Jesuit missionaries in New France in the seventeenth century easily explained All Souls Day by comparing it to the local Indian "Day of the Dead". *The Jesuit Relations* are replete with examples of how conscious were the people of their duties toward their dead. Ancestor worship was also well known in China and elsewhere in Asia, and missionaries there in times gone by perhaps had it easier explaining All Souls Day to them, and Christianizing the concept, than they would have to us in the Western world as the twentieth century draws to a close.

[4] See Michael Witczak, "The Feast of All Souls", in *The Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink, SJ, (Collegeville: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1990) 42.

[5] "Three Masses were formerly allowed to be celebrated by each priest, but one intention was stipulated for all the Poor Souls and another for the Pope's intention. This permission was granted by Benedict XV during the World War of 1914-1918 because of the great slaughter of that war, and because, since the time of the Reformation and the confiscation of church property, obligations for anniversary Masses which had come as gifts and legacies were almost impossible to continue in the intended manner. Some canonists believe Canon 905 of the New Code has abolished this practice. However, the *Sacramentary*, printed prior to the Code, provides three separate Masses for this date." See Jovian P. Lang, OFM, *Dictionary of the Liturgy* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1989) 21. Also see Francis X. Weiser, *The Holyday Book* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956) 121-136.

[6] Ratzinger stated: "Limbo was never a defined truth of faith. Personally—and here I am speaking more as a theologian and not as Prefect of the Congregation—I would abandon it since it was only a theological hypothesis. It formed part of a secondary thesis in support of a truth which is absolutely of first significance for faith, namely, the importance of baptism. To put it in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (John 3:5). One should not hesitate to give up the idea of "limbo" if need be (and it is worth noting that the very theologians who proposed "limbo" also said that parents could spare the child limbo by desiring its baptism and through prayer); but the concern behind it must not be surrendered. Baptism has never been a side issue for faith; it is not now, nor will it ever be." See Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 147-148.

[7] Morrissey, "Afterlife" in *The Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 28-29.

A History of Thanksgiving

The first day of thanks in America was celebrated in Virginia at Cape Henry in 1607, but it was the Pilgrims' three-day feast celebrated in early November of 1621, which we now popularly regard as the "First Thanksgiving." The first real Thanksgiving to God in the Plymouth Colony was actually celebrated during the summer of 1623 when the colonists declared a Thanksgiving holiday after their crops were saved by much needed rainfall. The Pilgrims left Plymouth, England on September 6, 1620. They sailed for a new world with the promise of both civil and religious liberty. For almost three months, 102 seafarers braved harsh elements to arrive off the coast of what is now Massachusetts, in late November of 1620. On December 11, prior to disembarking at

Plymouth Rock, they signed the "Mayflower Compact," America's original document of civil government and the first to introduce self-government.

Most of what we know about the Pilgrim Thanksgiving of 1621 comes from original accounts of the young colony's leaders, Governor William Bradford and Master Edward Winslow, in their own hand:



"They begane now to gather in ye small harvest they had, and to fitte up their houses and dwellings against winter, being well recovered in health & strength, and had all things in good plenty; for some were thus imployed in affairs abroad, others were excersised in fishing, aboute codd, & bass, & other fish, of which yey tooke good store, of which every family had their portion. All ye somer ther was no wante. And now begane to come in store of foule, as winter aproached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degree). And besids water foule, ther was great store of wild Turkie, of which they took many, besids venison, &c. Besids they had aboute a peck a meale a weeke to a person, or now since harvest, Indean come to yt proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty hear to their freinds in England, which were not fained, but true reports." —W.B. (William Bradford)

"Our Corne did proue well, & God be prayesd, we had a good increase of Indian Corne, and our Barly indifferent good, but our Pease not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late sowne, they came vp very well, and blossomed, but the Sunne parched them in the blossome; our harvest being gotten in, our Governour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after a more speciall manner reioyce together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labors; they foure in one day killed as much fowle, as with a little helpe beside, served the Company almost a weeke, at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming amongst vs, and among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with some nintie men, whom for three dayes we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed fiue Deere, which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed upon our Governour, and upon the Captaine, and others. And although it be not alwayes so plentifull, as it was at this time with vs, yet by the goodneses of God, we are so farre from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

— E.W. (Edward Winslow) Plymouth, in New England, his 11th of December, 1621.

A Thanksgiving Day Homily

Father Vincent Gilmore O. Praem.

Thanksgiving Day is like a national liturgy. It happens at the same time every year with the same rites. The rites: a turkey dinner with family. In our home, my home growing up, it was always the same. We ate in the formal dining room with the good silverware and china. Served was turkey, mashed potatoes with gravy, cranberry sauce, and Mom's special fruit salad, which we all loved, and pumpkin pie with whipped cream.

It was a happy time with most of the family home and sitting around the fireplace; and the guys going outside to throw a football around or have a snowball fight, if it was snowing. I grew up in Washington State. Family liturgy, it is what memories are made of; Christmas is the same way.

It is only when one gets older that one begins to reflect upon the meaning of these family liturgies, the context for these feasts and holidays. This national feast of Thanksgiving has worthy and fitting origins. It is situated in the fall after the harvest to give thanks to God for his bounty—thus Thanksgiving. It is a feast of gratitude. As Catholics we can readily relate to Thanksgiving because it is a fundamental element of our worship: Eucharist means Thanksgiving.

And now, a few words on gratitude-thanksgiving. Gratitude is the fundamental disposition of being a creature. Being humans created by God there is nothing we have, possess, own, enjoy, or love, that has not been given to us. If we ourselves give anything, whether it be time, gifts, love, knowledge, or prayer, it is because it has already been given.

A mistaken idea of man in our secular materialistic age is that we actually make things; by making, acting, and doing we define who we are and our destiny. We become gods; we think we are gods and we think we are in control. Technology has given us this illusion that we can control anything and everything by our activity. And so we have created a society of doing. The only value has become doing, working, making, buying, selling, and having more. The motto is do more, make more, have more, and everyone is busy, busy, busy; doing more, making more, and having more. And then, sadly, at the end of the day we are empty; one's value and worth is judged by how much stuff one has.

All of this frantic activity is totally missing the point of the essence of what it means to be human. The essence of being human is not doing, but being, not activity, but resting, giving, yes, but first receiving.

To be fully human and to truly give one must first receive. This is the fundamental quality of being human: receptivity.

We stand in need of the gift. The gift that makes us whole, gives us life, and gives us our true identity and meaning. We come to the most profound sense of ourselves, not through what we do, but through what we accept.

We must wait for the gift of love, and love can only be received as a gift. It cannot be "made" on one's own, without anyone else; one must wait for it, let it be given. We cannot become fully and wholly human in any other way than by being loved, by letting oneself be loved. This love represents simultaneously, both man's highest possibility and his deepest need. This necessary thing, receiving love, depends on our happiness and salvation. If we decline ourselves from being presented with this gift, we destroy ourselves. We will live in misery and unhappiness.

Salvation history is nothing other than God trying to give mankind this gift of love, and unfortunately much of God's efforts are thwarted by man's refusing the gift.

The primacy of acceptance is not intended to condemn man to passivity. On the contrary, it alone makes it possible to do the things of this world in a spirit of service, putting all our actions at the service of redemptive love. This is the meaning of the apostolate, this is what every Christian is called to be, a builder of the Kingdom. So on this Thanksgiving Day let each of us know and reflect upon where we stand with God. Do we stand as receivers of the gift of his love? And once we are good receivers then we can be givers.

We have already received a great deal - too much to comprehend, really - there is much more to receive starting now at this Eucharist. And what is the only appropriate response? Gratitude, gratitude is the only appropriate response. It is truly a day to give thanks; every day should be Thanksgiving Day. Happy Thanksgiving!

For what do we have to be Thankful?

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During the tense days of the Second World War many of our Hollywood stars, both men and women, gave generously of their time and talent to assist and to entertain our servicemen here and abroad. We know, for one, that Elsa Lanchester, British-born actress, frequently gave informal parties for servicemen in her Los Angeles

apartment. As each of her guests was about to leave, she asked him to write his name and address in her Servicemen's Book, as she called it.

Toward the end of each party this charming lady of the screen would address her guests in a tone that showed unquestioning trust in God. She assured them: "I promise each one of you who will write his name in my book that I will pray constantly for your safe return. God will watch over you."

As the months rolled into years, a number of these soldiers, sailors, and marines returned. Many made it a point to stop and say sincerely, "Thank you, Miss Lanchester," before they took train for home. After their departure the actress would take out her Servicemen's Book, find the name of the one who had returned safe, and check it by writing beneath the boy's name the words, "Thank you, God."

She wanted to thank God for each safe return. She did it thoroughly and efficiently. She wanted to be sure that thanks were rendered in every case. She even wrote it down.

It would be a fine idea for every one of us to have a book like that, a book in which we could write the countless blessings we have received, a book where we could write beside each blessing, "Thank You, God."

Such a procedure may seem prosaic and mechanical, yet it is much better than the opposite-never thanking God at all. If the plan would help us to be more grateful-let's try it. Try writing down the gifts God has bestowed on you today, yesterday, all last year. And then say, "Thank You, God," or write it down beside each benefit for which you should be grateful.

Let's make a start:

Thank You, God that I can see. There are thousands who cannot see. For them there is no sunrise or sunset; no autumn colors, no rainbow tinted flowers, no movies, no delights of the eye.

Thank You, God that I can hear. There are thousands who cannot hear the voice of their own mother, nor the singing of the birds, nor a symphony, nor the laughter of children.

Thank You, God that I can walk. I know thousands who can't take a single step, thousands who are confined to a bed or wheel chair, other thousands of men who lost their legs in a war-who spend their years in helpless dependence on the wavering kindness of others.

Thank You, God that I can work. Look at the many who can do nothing with brain or brawn or hands.

Thank You, God that I have something to eat. Millions as good as I, maybe better, have little or nothing to eat. Thousands are dying of hunger while I sit down to a Thanksgiving feast. Thank You, God, for the bumper crops of 2003. Our vast country could feed the world. In the breadbasket of America-Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska, there are mountains of golden wheat and pyramids of golden corn, Your gifts. Help us, O God to get this food, Your food, to Your hungry children.

Thank You, God, for my Catholic Faith, which teaches me to be thankful. Thank You, God, for freedom to worship You as You wish to be worshipped. Thank You for our beautiful churches, our faithful priests, our comfortable Catholic homes.

Thank You, God, for the privilege of attending Holy Mass and receiving Holy Communion. Thank You for all the sacraments and for the life of grace in my soul.

Thanks for the trees and thanks for the birds; thanks for a drink of refreshing water; thanks for the open roads and thanks for our Churches where I can stop and visit You; thanks for that meal and thanks for that restful sleep; thanks for friends and thanks for the roof over my head; thanks for the chance to do Your work and thanks for Your generous rewards; thanks for the wine and thanks for the wheat and thanks for the Body and Blood of Your Son; thanks for the urge and chance to pray and thanks for the pains You permit; thanks for the opportunity to learn all about You, from our Catholic papers, from pamphlets, from magazines and books.

No book or library of books is large enough to record Your blessings and Your gifts. Where can I find the pen or the power or the eloquence or the words or the endurance to thank You, God, for all Your gifts? They are without limit.

Every leaf and every star is a gift. Every kernel of corn and every shaft of wheat and every drop of rain and every blade of grass is a gift. How can I ever thank You for it all?

Your gifts are without limit. My thanks must be without limit. How can I render infinite, limitless thanks?

Holy Mass is an infinite prayer and sacrifice of thanks, a limitless act of gratitude. I will offer Holy Mass; I will attend Holy Mass, especially on Thanksgiving Day. That is how I will say again and again:

"Thank You, God, thank You." Amen.

"One act of thanksgiving,
when things go wrong with us,
is worth a thousand thanks when
things are agreeable to our inclinations."

- Bl. John of Avila. (16th cent.)

November 25 - Thanksgiving Day

The First Thanksgiving Proclamation

June 20, 1676

Charlestown, Massachusetts

"The Holy God having by a long and Continual Series of his Afflictive dispensations in and by the present War with the Heathen Natives of this land, written and brought to pass bitter things against his own Covenant people in this wilderness, yet so that we evidently discern that in the midst of his judgments he hath remembered mercy, having remembered his Footstool in the day of his sore displeasure against us for our sins, with many singular Intimations of his Fatherly Compassion, and regard; reserving many of our Towns from Desolation Threatened, and attempted by the Enemy, and giving us especially of late with many of our Confederates many signal Advantages against them, without such Disadvantage to ourselves as formerly we have been sensible of, if it be the Lord's mercy that we are not consumed, It certainly bespeaks our positive Thankfulness, when our Enemies are in any measure disappointed or destroyed; and fearing the Lord should take notice under so many Intimations of his returning mercy, we should be found an Insensible people, as not standing before Him with Thanksgiving, as well as lading him with our Complaints in the time of pressing Afflictions:

The Council has thought meet to appoint and set apart the 29th day of this instant June, as a day of Solemn Thanksgiving and praise to God for such his Goodness and Favor, many Particulars of which mercy might be Instanced, but we doubt not those who are sensible of God's Afflictions, have been as diligent to espy him returning to us; and that the Lord may behold us as a People offering Praise and thereby glorifying Him; the Council doth commend it to the Respective Ministers, Elders and people of this Jurisdiction; Solemnly and seriously to keep the same Beseeching that being persuaded by the mercies of God we may all, even this whole people offer up our bodies and souls as a living and acceptable Service unto God by Jesus Christ."

Thanksgiving Proclamation 1777

by the Continental Congress:

the first national Thanksgiving proclamation

IN CONGRESS - November 1, 1777

FORASMUCH as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with Gratitude their Obligation to him for Benefits received, and to implore such farther Blessings as they stand in Need of: And it having pleased him in his abundant Mercy, not only to continue to us the innumerable Bounties of his common Providence; but also to smile upon us in the Prosecution of a just and necessary War, for the Defense and Establishment of our unalienable Rights and Liberties; particularly in that he hath been pleased, in so great a Measure, to prosper the Means used for the Support of our Troops, and to crown our Arms with most signal success:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these UNITED STATES to set apart THURSDAY, the eighteenth Day of December next, for SOLEMN THANKSGIVING and PRAISE: That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves to the Service of their Divine Benefactor; and that, together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, whereby they had forfeited every Favor; and their humble and earnest Supplication that it may please GOD through the Merits of JESUS CHRIST, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of Remembrance; That it may please him graciously to afford his Blessing on the Governments of these States respectively, and prosper the public Council of the whole: To inspire our Commanders, both by Land and Sea, and all under them, with that Wisdom and Fortitude which may render them fit Instruments, under the Providence of Almighty GOD, to secure for these United States, the greatest of all human Blessings, INDEPENDENCE and PEACE: That it may please him, to prosper the Trade and Manufactures of the People, and the Labor of the Husbandman, that our Land may yield its Increase: To take Schools and Seminaries of Education, so necessary for cultivating the Principles of true Liberty, Virtue and Piety, under his nurturing Hand; and to prosper the Means of Religion, for the promotion and enlargement of that Kingdom, which consists "in Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Ghost."

And it is further recommended, that servile Labor, and such Recreation, as, though at other Times innocent, may be unbecoming the Purpose of this Appointment, be omitted on so solemn an Occasion.

Thanksgiving Day 1789

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

By the President of the United States of America, a Proclamation.

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor-- and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be-- That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks--for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation--for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war--for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed--for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted--for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions-- to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually--to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed--to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord--To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us--and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

Thanksgiving Day 1863

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this 3d day of October A.D. 1863, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

NOTE: Abraham Lincoln issued Thanksgiving Proclamations in the spring of 1862 and the spring of 1863; both proclamations gave thanks for victories in battle. Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation in the autumn of 1863 – the second Thanksgiving Proclamation in that year - gave thanks for the general blessings of the year. This second 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation, the first in the unbroken string of annual Thanksgiving proclamations, is regarded as the true beginning of the national Thanksgiving holiday. (Pilgrim Hall Museum)
