

1st Sunday of Advent

This past Thursday we as a nation celebrated Thanksgiving Day, this is a celebration that dates back to before there was even the United States of America. A number of years ago I was serving in a Parish with a priest from Uganda, in Africa, his name was Fr. Paul. I served with Fr. Paul the first two years he was in the United States, and he was always asking about our customs and holidays. I remember when on a November morning he came into the kitchen and sat down at the Kitchen table where I was having a cup of tea and reading the paper. I offered him a cup of tea which he accepted and then he asked me to explain the Thanksgiving Holiday to him.

How does one explain the Thanksgiving Holiday to someone from another country? This Holiday can be viewed in two different ways. One can look to the past and see the Holiday in its historical perspective, or it can be viewed from the current day celebration and what it means to us today. Thanksgiving is rooted in an English tradition that dates back to the Protestant Reformation. This Holiday also has aspects of the harvest festival, even though the harvest in New England, occurs well before the late November date of the modern-day Thanksgiving Holiday. It is in New England where the roots of the Thanksgiving Holiday can be found. It was the Puritans in the time of the Protestant Reformation, that wished to completely eliminate all Church Holidays and replace them with special days of Fasting and days of Thanksgiving. Pilgrims and Puritans who emigrated from England in the 1620's and 1630's brought the tradition of Days of Fasting and Days of Thanksgiving with them to New England. The modern Thanksgiving Holiday can be traced to a well recorded event in Virginia in 1619 and another documented celebration at Plymouth in 1621. The 1619 arrival of 38 English settlers at Berkeley Hundred in Charles City County, Virginia, concluded with a religious celebration as dictated by the group's charter from the London Company, which required that in the land of Virginia there is to be a yearly day of thanksgiving to Almighty God. The 1621 Plymouth Thanksgiving was prompted by a good harvest, which the Pilgrims celebrated with native Americans, who helped them get through the previous winter by giving them food in a time of scarcity.

Today the Thanksgiving Holiday is centered on a meal that is celebrated by family and friends, the main course of this meal is a turkey. This meal includes a prayer of being thankful for all the blessings that God has placed in our lives. The modern side dishes for a Thanksgiving meal includes bean casserole, candied yams, sweet potato casserole with marshmallows, mashed potatoes, stuffing, cornbread and cranberry relish. Of course, each region of the country has its own side dishes to included in the Thanksgiving Meal. For me how can one have a Thanksgiving meal without red chile, and tamales. Today it is normal for Thanksgiving to include finding a way to give to those in need, be it through food baskets or helping at a soup kitchen. One also cannot celebrate Thanksgiving without having a slice of pumpkin pie and watching an NFL Football game.

As I struggled to explain the Thanksgiving Holiday to Fr. Paul, I found the celebration of the Advent Season helpful in the explanation of Thanksgiving. The Season of Advent has a two-fold purpose, the first part of Advent is preparing for the second coming of Christ and the second part of the Advent Season is focused on preparing of the celebration of the Birth of the Christ. One does not truly embrace the Season of Advent if there is not the embracing of the two natures of this Season, preparing for the second coming of Christ and preparing to celebrate the first coming of Christ. It is the same for embracing and understanding Thanksgiving, one needs to understand the historical roots of Thanksgiving and embrace the modern celebration of Thanksgiving to truly comprehend the meaning and of the Thanksgiving Holiday to the people of the United States of America.

This Sunday, as we enter into the Advent Season just recently celebrating our Thanksgiving Holiday, we can draw from our experience of Thanksgiving to embrace and understand the Advent Season. Just as the modern celebration of Thanksgiving invites us to be thankful to God, spend time with family and friends, and also to reach out and help others, so it is the same with the Advent Season. This year our celebration of Thanksgiving and Advent is different from the past due to the pandemic, but they both still have the same meaning and message for you and I.