

Whatever happened to Thanksgiving?

Last month's celebration of Thanksgiving invited me to once again go back to the history books to refresh my memory with regard to the historical roots of the holiday. With psychologists giving advice on how to avoid family feuds between quarreling relatives, others who can't wait for the football games, and still others plotting strategies on how to best maneuver their way through the "Black Friday" sales, perhaps we have lost some of the real meaning of the celebration. In fact, I would go further to say that perhaps we have lost much more than we realize. Let us take a historical glimpse to the roots of this day.

The Mayflower left from Plymouth, England, in September of 1620 with 102 passengers aboard. After a journey of 66 days at sea, they arrived at what was the colony of Massachusetts. After that first New England winter, only one half of those pilgrims had survived to see the spring. That March, the pilgrims received a surprise visit from an Abenaki Indian who astonished them by speaking English. Days later, he returned with a fellow Native American (from the Pawtuxet tribe) named Squanto. Squanto also spoke to them in English. He had been kidnapped by an English sea captain and sold into slavery before escaping and returning to the New World. Seeing the plight of the pilgrims, Squanto taught them to plant corn, to extract sap from the maple trees, how to fish in the rivers, and how to stay away from certain poisonous plants. He also introduced them to the Wampanoag tribe (with whom they would have friendly relations for more than 50 years).

In November of 1621, the pilgrims were able to realize their first harvest of corn. They invited the Wampanoag to share their joy and that first Thanksgiving lasted for three days. We know that there were many celebrations to follow for many years. It was then in the year 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, that Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that the last Thursday of November would be set aside as Thanksgiving (it would later be changed to the fourth Thursday). He asked Americans to invoke God to "commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife" and to "heal the wounds of the

nation.”

Today, as our country yearns for comprehensive immigration reform for a broken system, we cannot forget our history. We are a country of immigrants. The pilgrims were the “aliens” of the past – and isn’t it ironic that they were received with compassion (even by one who had suffered as a slave)! In our midst today, there are millions of our brothers and sisters who, due to the injustices caused by our broken immigration system, are widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in this lamentable situation in which we find ourselves. Our lives as followers of Jesus and our Catholic teaching invite us today to “heal the wounds of the nation” and to remember that Thanksgiving is much more than food, football and sales.

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