

A History and Heritage of Thanksgiving

“In Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.” With these words began America’s first celebration of thanksgiving. The date is September 8th, 1565; the place is recently discovered land on the continent of North America, land that will soon be recognized as St. Augustine, Florida, the nation’s oldest city and the site of the first Catholic Mass on American soil. This is a moment I would want to witness, standing just a few feet away from the altar at that moment, since it is America’s first real Thanksgiving feast, taking place in my state and consecrating it to God.

“Land! Land! There is land ahead! Hurrah! Look, Captain! Land!” Joyful shouts rose from the deck of the Spanish galleon. Eleven days after this, on September 8th, Pedro Menendez de Aviles and his crew set foot on Florida’s soil, offered a prayer of thanksgiving, and were peacefully greeted by the Timucuan Indians. Yet they were not the first to land in that area. Juan Ponce de Leon had landed near St. Augustine during Easter week in 1513 and had named the territory “Pascua Florida,” meaning “Easter of Flowers.” Ponce De Leon was looking for the legendary Fountain of Youth, but not finding it, he left and died soon after. Pedro Menendez de Aviles arrived in 1565, naming the new Spanish colony “St. Augustine” for the saint on whose feast day the land was sighted.

Just as the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock did a few decades later, the Spaniards held a Thanksgiving feast to give thanks to God for allowing them safe travels and landing. The Thanksgiving meal that the explorers shared was the Eucharist, a word which in Greek means “thanksgiving” and is used to indicate Christ’s Body and Blood,

consecrated by the hands of the priest and given by Christ himself. The preparations for this feast did not involve harvesting corn, hunting turkeys, and boiling cranberries, however. Instead, a rustic altar was built using logs as Father Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales put on the priestly vestments and brought out the candles, the missalettes, and the bread and wine that would become the Body and Blood of Christ. Standing in front of the crude altar, facing east, Father Francisco intoned the opening prayers of the Mass. The Scriptures were read, prayers were said, the bread and wine consecrated into Christ's body and blood, and Holy Communion was given to the people. Finally, the whole company jubilantly joined in the closing words, "Deo Gratias!" Thanks be to God!

Being a Catholic citizen of Florida, I would want to witness this moment as if I were one of the Spanish explorers kneeling a few feet away from the altar, since it is a meaningful event in the history of my religion and state. Primarily, it is the first Catholic Mass celebrated on United States soil, making it the dawn of the spread of the Faith in America. Second, by offering that first Mass and marking the place with a rustic altar and cross, the Spaniards dedicated the region to God and claimed it for the Catholic Church. Since the settlers of the Massachusetts and Virginia colonies did not share the same beliefs the Spaniards had, the founding of St. Augustine for Catholicism is a beautiful gift to the Church. A third reason why I'd like to witness this event is because it made history – St. Augustine Florida is the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in the United States of America!

I have visited St. Augustine several times and have always been fond of the quaint, historic, educational, and yet home-like environment that I feel when touring the

historical sites. Visiting the site of the rustic altar and cross at Mission Nombre de Dios always gives me a sense of peace and calm. I feel at home and close to God, knowing that I am at the site of the United States' first Holy Mass, the real feast of Thanksgiving. I am proud that the history and heritage of St. Augustine is part of the history of my state!