

# Thanksgiving

## It's What We Do All Year

by Kathleen M. Carroll

What does the Thanksgiving holiday have to do with our Catholic faith? “Nothing at all,” some might say. It is a secular holiday with roots in the traditions of the very anti-Catholic Puritans. But it is a day that combines gratitude, food, and family—you can’t get much more Catholic than that.

### Gratitude

All people of faith have some element of praise and thanksgiving in their spiritual practice. Devout Jews recite the Amidah—a prayer that begins with God’s praises and concludes with thanksgiving—three times a day. Muslims pray five times a day to thank God. For Catholics, though, there is an even more intimate connection between our faith and gratitude.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the



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Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC, 1324). The very word *Eucharist*, though, is taken from the Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” The Church requires us to attend Mass on Sunday (or Saturday evening), so that we can all together fulfill our Lord’s request: “Do this in memory of me.” Our Liturgy of the Word reminds us of the words of Scripture—our story as a people. Our Liturgy of the Eucharist reminds us that we are a family in faith. And the best way to celebrate a gathering of family is with a shared meal.

## **Food**

The “correct” contents of the Thanksgiving meal can be a source of comfort, but also a cornucopia of contention. The homey smells of turkey and pumpkin pie wafting from the oven inspire nostalgia and evoke charming memories of holidays past. In some cases, however, the ingredients of the “proper” meal have become so ritualized in some families that there is no room for error.

I have an in-law for whom dressing is not dressing if it is not made with oysters. My father had grown so attached to a gaudy, colorful turkey platter that he threatened to “cancel” Thanksgiving altogether when it disappeared. And my mother was so insistent that there be

cranberry sauce on the table (“and not that fancy kind with the lumps in it, but the old-fashioned kind from a can”), that one year we watched the turkey grow cold while one of my brothers went trekking to find an open grocery store.

While this habit can tend to an unfortunate extreme, it reminds us of what we as Catholics know very well—ritual and tradition are important. When we come together at Mass, there might be a surprise of coffee and doughnuts in the school cafeteria afterward, but there will be no surprises on the altar. There is a warm comfort in knowing where everything is, knowing what comes next, knowing where we belong. All we love about home and family is celebrated when we gather around a table prepared just so, just like always.

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