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The Feast of Christ the King

Jesus said to his disciples:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Matthew 25:31-46

A Matter of the Heart

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Priests for Life thanks the United States bishops for their statement "A Matter of the Heart," issued in observance of the upcoming thirtieth anniversary of Roe vs. Wade (see www.usccb.org/bishops/heart.htm).

The statement is filled both with hope and determination, declaring that "Roe vs. Wade must be reversed," and also pointing out many signs of progress.

The word "heart" is used often in the statement. It speaks with special emphasis of the loving and hopeful hearts of the young. It speaks of the hearts of children broken by abortion. It speaks of the hearts of those tempted to abort, and broken by hav-

ing aborted their child. The bishops point out that we must strive to know these hearts. We are no strangers to evil, temptation, and sin. We have all aborted God's will in our lives. We will know the hearts of the women and men ensnared by abortion to the extent that we strive with honesty and courage to know our own hearts.

The statement calls us to reach the hearts wounded by abortion, and give them hope. Abortion, indeed, is not only a sin against life, but a sin against hope. It says there is no future, no reason good enough to strive for life. To affirm life, on the other hand, is to say there is room for hope, and room to welcome the unwanted. Welcome opens the door to

hope, and hope opens the door to life.

In calling for a ministry to the heart, the bishops also exercise it by their promise in this statement that the Church is ready to assist all who are pregnant and in need, and to accompany all who need repentance, healing and forgiveness.

The fact that the defense of life is "a matter of the heart" obviously does not exclude matters of the law, because this statement calls for a reversal in the law. The things of the heart and the things of the law affect each other in profound ways.

Yet evil, as our Lord told us, flows from what is in the heart. Nobody has to choose or tolerate abortion. No nation or public official should feel bound to uphold a "law of the land" that turns God's law upside down. The heart is free when it recognizes truth, and chooses what is good, despite the superficial attraction of evil. The heart is pure when it belongs to God, and thereby belongs to life.

The most fundamental sense in which the pro-life effort is "a matter of the heart" is that to end abortion, our hearts must be broken. This evil cannot simply be something we know about or debate. We have to allow it to grieve us, to bring us to tears, to bring us to our knees. "Blessed are those who mourn," for only when our hearts are broken can they open wide enough to receive the victory which has already been won, the victory of truth over lies, of hope over despair, of life over death.

Indeed, this is a matter of the heart.

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The Eve of Thanksgiving: A Reflection

Thanksgiving is a truly "catholic" celebration. That is, it is a great American festival that is universal and meaningful to all, which is the meaning of the word catholic. All Americans, those who consider themselves religious and those who do not, seem to enjoy this annual autumn celebration. It can be a great time to gather with the extended members of one's family, partake in a delicious home cooked meal, watch a football game or parade on television and savor the simple pleasures of life.

We must admit that for many Americans Thanksgiving is a time to be grateful for what they themselves have accomplished, such as earning more money or obtaining a better job. Or they are grateful to "fate" because they have escaped the violence of Hurricane Lili, war, murderers and snipers. Others who have experienced great suffering and death in their families, learned they have a terminal illness, endured divorce or lost their employment this year may sincerely ask what do they have to be thankful for. They may feel abandoned by God.

The majority of Americans who believe in God (in many different faith traditions, including Christians) think of this as a day to be thankful to God for the gift of life's simple pleasures, even if they do not say a prayer or enter a house of worship. Many Catholics, like those of other faiths, pray special prayers at home or in their churches on this day. Of course Catholics and other Christians who commemorate the Lord's Supper and celebrate a eucharistic liturgy are aware that the very word eucharist comes from the Greek word which means "to give thanks." Every day that we give thanks to God by participating prayerfully in the eucharist is "thanksgiving day" in the deepest meaning of the words. This is why Thanksgiving is not only a catholic celebration of all U.S. citizens but also a Catholic celebration for members of the Church. This is obvious from the numbers of Catholics who faithfully participate in the Eucharist on Thanksgiving Day, even though it is a civil holiday and not a Church Holy Day. Yet, in some parishes more Catholics are at Mass on Thanksgiving than on designated Holy Days.

The celebration of Thanksgiving as we know it is a relatively recent and gradual development. In 1780 the Protestant Episcopal Church proclaimed the first Thursday in November a day for giving thanks to God. When the Revolutionary War finally ended, President George Washington designated Thursday, November 26, 1789 as a day of "public thanksgiving for the many favors of Almighty God." New York State began its observance in 1817. Documents suggest that as many as 28 states had some form of Thanksgiving commemoration by 1859. However, it did not become a national day of "praise to our beneficent Father" until Abraham Lincoln so designated the

last Thursday in November in 1863. By 1939 the commercialization of Christmas prompted President Roosevelt to move the observance one week earlier to the fourth Thursday of November so that businesses could lengthen the shopping days before Christmas. It became a federal holiday in 1941. (An unintended and indirect consequence of this is the fact it is almost impossible for Catholics to



**Bishop
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prayerfully celebrate the renewing season of Advent surrounded by Christmas decorations the day after Thanksgiving.)

While the "tradition" of regularly celebrating Thanksgiving did not get underway until 1780, most of us associate this fall festival with the arrival of European pilgrims at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean on the Mayflower fleeing religious persecution and looking for a new home, they landed on November 21 with little to live on. Perhaps half of the one hundred settlers died the first year. They were welcomed by Governor William Bradford. Though popular history books may have romanticized the early relationship between the Native peoples and the settlers, we do know that Squanto, a Wampanoag taught them the many uses of corn and how to hunt and fish in a strange land.

Most of us whose ideas were formed by Hollywood portrayals of "cowboys and Indians" are ignorant of authentic native American customs. They had their own ways of giving thanks. As Olyshaa, a Santee Dakota physician wrote in 1911, "In our lives there is only one inevitable duty — the duty of prayer, the daily recognition of the unseen and eternal. Whenever in the course of the daily hunt, the Red Hunter comes upon a scene that is strikingly beautiful or sublime (a black thundercloud with the rainbow's glowing arch above the mountain, a white waterfall in the heart of a green gorge, a vast prairie tinged with the blue-red of sunset) he pauses for an instant in an attitude of worship. No need to call one day in seven "holy" since all days come from the Great Spirit."

Governor Bradford called for a day of thanks to God for the survival of the new settlers. Some accounts say sixty pilgrims and ninety Native Americans participated. This "day of thanksgiving" idea was popular in the New England colonies, but it did not become an annual tradition. (You might be surprised to know that even earlier, on December 4, 1619, a small group of English settlers at the Berkeley plantation in Virginia had a day of thanksgiving for their safe voyage across the dangerous ocean.)

Of course, English Catholics also came to this "new world" when they

were forbidden to practice their faith. One third of the 300 colonists who landed at St. Clement's Island on March 25, 1634 to establish the community of Maryland (named for the Mother of Jesus) were Catholics. A Jesuit priest, Fr. Andrew White, celebrated the Eucharist, (the supreme act of Thanksgiving) perhaps the first Mass in the colonies, in a community committed to religious freedom.

All of these early Christian celebrations almost certainly took much of their inspiration from the Jewish celebrations in the Old Testament. Pilgrims familiar with Scripture would have known the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. This mid-October (the 15th of Tishri) celebration is at the end of the harvest season, five days after the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). During these days faithful Jewish people to this day meditate on God's saving power in their history, recalling their Exodus from slavery in Egypt, through the desert, escaping the Pharaoh's chariots in the Red Sea and their deliverance in the Promised Land. They offer fresh wine and the fruit of the land in their sanctuaries, giving thanks to God for watching over them and for his promise to care for them as His chosen people. This theme is echoed in the special Thanksgiving Day Preface used in Masses in the United States. (While this Preface sadly does not reflect the experience of Africans who were not fleeing persecution but were being persecuted, brought to this country in chains and slavery, it does reflect the hope of all who long for freedom.)

"Once you chose a people and gave them a destiny and, when you brought them out of bondage to freedom, they carried with them the promise that all people would be blessed and all could be free.

It happened to our fathers and mothers, who came to this land as if out of a desert into a place of promise and hope. It happens to us still, in our time,

As you lead all people through your Church to the blessed vision of peace."

Unfortunately, most people do not think about any of these things. Thanksgiving is just a "holiday." **But we could think about them!** As you and your family enjoy the turkey with all the trimmings on Thanksgiving Day, be sure to savor to the fullest birdsong, flower-scent, skycolor, and herb-taste. Remember that it is not ourselves that we are thanking. Nor is it science, technology, money or any other "god" of our own making. We are giving thanks to the God who is God. We are giving thanks to the God who has given us His Son, Jesus Christ who has given us Himself, His Body and Blood in that perfect act of Thanksgiving - The Eucharist!

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

