



Catholic Courier

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

VOL. 106 NO. 8

THURSDAY, November 24, 1994

75¢

20 PAGES

Happy Thanksgiving!



Cardinal Gibbons' efforts helped to pave the way for Catholics to join Thanksgiving Day festivities

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester had many reasons to be grateful on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 26, 1868.

The diocese had just been formed about eight months earlier — March 3 to be exact — out of eight counties that split off from the Buffalo diocese (Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Tioga counties would be added in 1896). The fledgling diocese had also welcomed its first bishop, Bernard J. McQuaid, on July 16.

Meanwhile, in the recent national election, General Ulysses S. Grant, who was commander in chief of the victorious Union forces in the Civil War just three years prior, had been overwhelmingly elected 18th president of the United States. And it was a scant five years since President Abraham Lincoln had begun the annual tradition of calling for a national day of thanksgiving to be celebrated in November.

Chances are, however, that while most diocesan Catholics joined their fellow citizens in the feasting, revelries and charitable works on that Thanksgiving Day in 1868, some Catholic households and diocesan churches abstained.

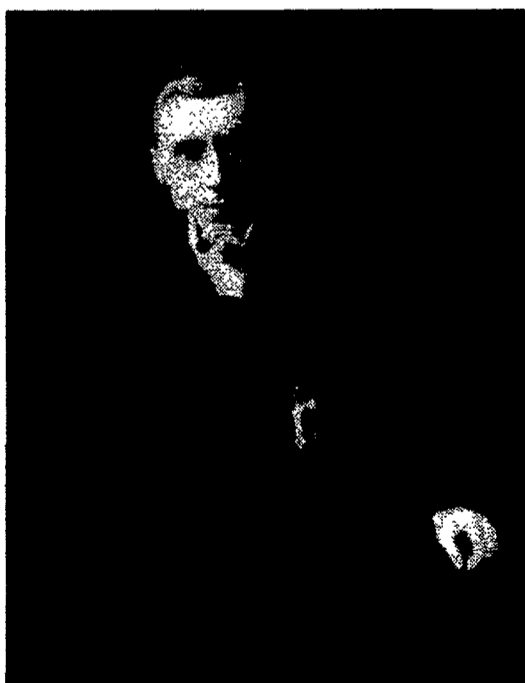
Indeed, among some Catholics at that time, Thanksgiving Day was considered a feast day with Protestant — even anti-Catholic — overtones. As late as 1889, then-Father and later Bishop Benjamin J. Keiley of Savannah, Ga., referred to the day as "the damnably Puritanical substitute for Christmas."

Diana K. Appelbaum echoed Bishop Keiley's observation concerning the holiday in her 1984 book, "Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, an American History."

"Thanksgiving originated, in part, as a Puritan reaction against Catholic holy days," Appelbaum wrote. "In turn, once Thanksgiving was established, the Catholic Church refused to observe this Puritan holy day."

That Thanksgiving Day did eventually gain acceptance among Catholics is, in part, a tribute to Cardinal James Gibbons, archbishop of Baltimore from 1877 to 1921.

It was, in fact, a call by Cardinal Gibbons in 1889 that all Catholics, where ever possible, try to attend Mass on Thanksgiving Day that prompted Bishop Keiley not only to condemn the day, but to declare that Cardinal Gibbons had "out-Heroded



Cardinal James Gibbons

Herod."

Despite such sentiments among some of his contemporaries, Cardinal Gibbons remained enthusiastic about Catholic participation in the national holiday, arguing, "We should not let Protestants surpass us in our expression of loyalty and devotion to our country."

"(Cardinal Gibbons) was a strong Americanizer," explained Christopher Kauffman, a professor of church history at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. In other words, the cardinal promoted Catholic involvement in American life.

However, some church leaders — including Rochester's Bishop McQuaid — differed on how far this involvement into American life should extend. They were concerned that Catholics might lose their faith if they accommodated themselves too far to American society, Kauffman added.

But in his Pastoral Letter of 1884 — the product of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore — Cardinal Gibbons addressed some of those fears when he wrote: "We think we can claim to be acquainted both with the laws, institutions and spirit of the Catholic Church, and with the laws, institutions and spirit of our country; and we emphatically declare that there is no antagonism between them."

In the letter, Cardinal Gibbons noted that Catholics need not lay aside devotion to the church to be true Americans, and repudiated "the insinuation that we need to abate any of our love for our country's principles and institutions, to be faithful Catholics."

Thanksgiving Day was one of those American institutions that provided a "fitting occasion" for Catholics to gather together "to return thanks to God for His blessings to the country," Cardinal Gibbons declared in his Thanksgiving Day sermon in 1881. "Let each of us, also, beloved brethren, be diligent in offering thanks to God for individual blessings we have received, and then we may hope to be more abundantly refreshed at the fountain of grace, for the prayer of thanksgiving is a heavenly stream that flows into the ocean of Divine love and returns to us again in showers of benediction."

But not all Catholics saw this day as one to think back on blessings, Kauffman not-

Continued on page 18