

COLUMNISTS

Give thanks, but remember less fortunate

In the Catholic understanding of reality, every created being is an actual, or at least potential, bearer of the presence of God. Theologians refer to this as the Catholic sacramental vision, one that "sees" and experiences the invisible God in and through visible signs.

According to the Catholic sacramental vision, there is very little that is truly alien to Christian faith or that cannot be brought somehow within the embrace of God's redemptive love as manifested in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That sacramental principle, however, is not relevant for Catholics and other Christians alone. It is a principle that is pertinent to non-Christians and to non-religious humanists as well.

Nor is the principle restricted in its application. It applies even to secular holidays. Each of them, viewed within a sacramental perspective, is a celebration of one aspect or another of the mystery of God's presence and activity among us.

Thus, a birthday is an annual celebration of the gift of life, with or without explicit reference to God or to Jesus Christ. So, too, Valentine's Day celebrates the exchange of the gift of love. Similarly, Memorial Day celebrates the heroic self-gift of life for the sake of others.

Thanksgiving, a holiday observed in Canada in early October and in the Unit-



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ed States in late November, is a secular holiday whose deeper religious significance is not even slightly difficult to discern.

The holiday had its origin in 1621 when the pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, in present-day Massachusetts, gave thanks to God for the bounteous harvest they reaped. They did so with a great feast at which roasted turkeys were the main course.

A century and a half later (1789), President George Washington proclaimed Thanksgiving Day as a national holiday, and President Abraham Lincoln revived the custom almost a century after that (1863). It was in 1941 that the U.S. Congress determined that Thanksgiving Day should be celebrated annually as a national holiday, on the fourth Thursday of November.

Each year Americans and Canadians

alike, whether religious or not, have an opportunity to give thanks for the blessings of life. To be sure, their act of thanksgiving is explicitly and formally religious if it is directed to God by name. But it is at least implicitly religious if it is truly an act of thanksgiving, that is, a recognition that our blessings and bounty owe more to others than to ourselves.

The sense of dependence and the gratitude that should follow logically upon it are religious in nature, because, whether we acknowledge it or not, God is the One upon whom we are all ultimately dependent.

But there is even more to the act of thanksgiving than that. It is also a religious and, more broadly, a humane sentiment to recall, as we give thanks, that there are many who do not share in our blessings.

Thanksgiving, therefore, is not only a time for giving thanks (whether explicitly to God or not), but also for seeking (from God or from within ourselves) the capacity to open our eyes, ears, minds and hearts to the needs of others.

How often, in fact, do prayers before meals now include expressions of concern for those who lack the blessings of good and plentiful food, or who are without a roof over their heads, or who suffer oppression or tragedy in one part of the world or another?

It is a trend noticeable especially to Catholics in the post-Vatican II era, with its renewed emphasis on the church's "preferential option for the poor" and its commitment to social justice and human rights.

What we have grown accustomed to doing at table needs to reach over to the celebration of Thanksgiving Day itself — not just in the grace before the Thanksgiving meal itself, but in the observance of the holiday as a whole.

It is a connection to be made in Thanksgiving sermons, in editorial reflections, in television and radio commentaries, and especially in parental explanations of the holiday to their children.

Thanksgiving Day is surely a time for giving thanks to God for all that we have — the gift of life, the blessings of a loving family, the security of food, clothing and a place to live — but it is just as surely a time for thinking of, and resolving to act on behalf of, those who lack those same gifts and blessings.

To do so is to make of this holiday one that is meaningful not only for Christians and other religious people, but for all those who value human dignity and recognize that we are all part of one human family.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Historical evidence of Jesus exists

Q. Jesus Christ is surely one of the greatest figures in history. Can you tell us if he is mentioned anywhere other than in the Bible? (Texas)

A. I assume you are asking about early Christian history, around the time the New Testament was being formed.

For us Christians, who believe that the coming of Jesus was the pivotal point in human history, it's difficult to imagine how little interest he aroused apart from his own small community of followers.

From any viewpoint other than faith, he was, after all, merely the leader of a tiny offshoot group of Jews, in a spectacularly insignificant corner of the Roman Empire.

The first historical mention of Jesus outside the circle of Christians apparently was by Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian who eventually won the close friendship of Vespasian and other Roman emperors.

This historian's works, especially *The Antiquities of the Jews*, completed about the year 94, were highly prized resources by St. Jerome and other early church fathers.



question
corner

BY FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

Toward the end of the book, Josephus describes how, under the procurator Albinus, there was brought before a group of judges "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James" (Book XX 9.1).

This would have been James the apostle, one of the three disciples closest to our Lord, who died as a martyr in the year 44.

An earlier mention of Jesus in the *Antiquities* as a miracle worker who rose three days after dying was almost certainly added later by a Christian "copy editor."

The first mention of Jesus by a pagan

writer seems to be by the Roman historian Gaius Suetonius. In his *Life of Claudius* (perhaps about 120 A.D.) he writes, "Since the Jews made continual disturbances at the instigation of Christus, he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome."

This is generally accepted as referring to the early Christians and to Christ, though the timing is rather faulty. Claudius was emperor some years after Christ.

Q. A PBS television program on the Book of Genesis noted that after Cain killed Abel, God banished him from the territory and marked him somehow.

Cain then was afraid that anyone who recognized him would kill him. Who was he afraid of? Who was there to kill him?

Cain went east and married and built a great city. How could he marry a non-existent woman? (Missouri)

A. Such biblical dilemmas are another proof that not all, if indeed any, parts of the Bible can be read as straight history in the modern sense of that word.

This is true at all stages, but in a particular way for the "pre-history" portion

of Genesis, generally chapters 1 to 11.

It is the position of the Catholic Church that the scriptural truth of these stories lies not in their scientific accuracy, since the writers did not profess to be giving scientific descriptions of creation and early human history.

They were writing truths of faith: that the world came from the loving hand of God; that humans were created in his image and were meant to live intimately with him; that evil came into creation through human prideful desire to be like God; that even then God had plans to restore the broken unity, and so on.

We can become tied up in endless conflicts and contradictions of this sort if we don't acknowledge that many literary forms were utilized by the biblical authors to convey their message.

At least, as I say, this is what the Catholic Church teaches, as explained in its official documents on biblical interpretation.

Father Dietzen is pastor of Holy Trinity Church, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, Ill. 61701. Questions may be sent to him there.

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