

The Other First American Thanksgivings

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This Thursday our nation will be celebrating a civic holiday which is in fact a deeply religious observance. Even a cursory reading of its history and seminal declarations reveals right off that Thanksgiving Day at its heart is essentially an acknowledgement of God's blessings.

Our national consciousness is impressed with the story of the Pilgrims & Indians celebrating that "first" iconic Thanksgiving Day in 1621 at Plymouth Rock. But it should be known that Spanish Catholics have a double claim to that honor.

At St. Augustine, Florida, on the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity, 1565 the conquistador *Pedro Menendez de Aviles* gave thanks to God at Holy Mass followed by a meal shared with the Timucua Indians.

Before century's end there was another, even more resplendent thanksgiving observance in what was later to become the State of Texas.

In 1595 Emperor Philip II of Spain chose 43 year old *Don Juan de Oñate y Salazar* to explore the territory north of his colony of New Spain (present day Mexico). Preparations took several years, and on January 26, 1598 the Spanish set out on an epic journey northwards with 580 men & their families, 83 ox carts, 26 wagons and 7,000 livestock. Importantly, the entourage included ten Franciscan priests.

One can imagine the arduous and dangerous nature of such a voyage through the Chihuahuan desert. They were in fact extending the Spanish *Camino Real* or Royal Road, which was a key conduit for the Christianization of the New World.

Don Juan's personal standard was of white silk, emblazoned with images of Our Lady, his personal patron St. John and Spain's special patron *Santiago* (St. James the Greater). The expedition crossed the frontier and settled just across the Rio Grande, near current day El Paso, Texas. Upon arriving in what is now American territory, as was customary they sang the venerable Latin hymn of thanks to God entitled the *Te Deum*. A temporary chapel was quickly erected and the priests offered a Solemn High Mass, to the praise and glory of Jesus Christ.

Don Juan took formal possession of the territory and named it New Mexico, which at that time encompassed a much larger swath of the current territory of the United States. In his public declaration he proclaimed, "*In the Name of the most Holy Trinity, I take possession of this whole land this April 30, 1598, in honor of Our Lord Jesus Christ, on this day of the Ascension of Our Lord...*"

Then was raised the earthly standard, the royal Spanish flag; followed by the far more important and everlasting standard, the Cross of Christ. The Spanish flag no longer flutters over our land, but the Cross to this day reaches into the heavens from countless steeples across our nation.

A great feast was prepared to celebrate and continue the thanksgiving, which included races, games and even a play enacting scenes of native Americans hearing the Gospel for the first time and being baptized.

By the time the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, a *mestizo* (blended Spanish and Native) Catholic civilization had been flourishing for over a century in the New World, with towns and cities, stone churches and even seven universities. Someone as influential and powerful as Don Juan's wife, for example, *Dona Isabel de Tolosa Cortés de Montezuma*, was herself of mixed blood. She was in fact the great granddaughter of the Aztec Emperor Montezuma, whose nobility had been ratified by the Spanish crown.

Before the expedition was embarked upon, Don Juan de Oñate was already very powerful and wealthy. In fact, he personally subsidized the venture. And so the question arises as to why he risked all in such an uncertain endeavor. The answer can be found in Spanish crown's clearly stated instructions to Don Juan, as told in his diary, that "*expanding the boundaries of the Religion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*" was its primary purpose.

Remembering the Christianity of our national history is of the greatest importance. And due honor should be paid to the great men and women who celebrated what could rightly be regarded as those other "first" Thanksgivings: in Florida and Texas in the Years of Our Lord 1565 and 1598.