

How Catholics can reclaim the American feast of Thanksgiving

How about bean soup to celebrate Thanksgiving, rather than turkey, stuffing and mashed potatoes?



No thanks? Me, neither.

But that might be the more historically accurate — and more Catholic — way to mark Thanksgiving.

Long before the Pilgrims gathered with Indians in 1621 at Plymouth, Mass., for a harvest feast, Spanish explorer Pedro Menendez de Aviles landed at what he called (and remains today) St. Augustine, Fla.

The explorer participated in a Mass with his fellow voyagers, and then sat down to a feast of thanksgiving — garbanzo bean soup — with Timucua Indians. (The Indians also apparently contributed oysters and clams to the meal.)

The date was Sept. 8, 1565.

“By the time the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, St. Augustine was up for urban renewal,” [joked](#) Michael Gannon, the historian (and former priest) who first documented the earlier thanksgiving meal in a 1965 book, “The Cross in the Sand.”

But Gannon, in a 2007 USA Today [article](#), noted that “the English” wrote our nation’s history and established the traditions — so the Plymouth story is likely to remain the dominant narrative.

That’s lamented by folks like Susan Parker, executive director of the St. Augustine Historical Society. “There’s a tradition of diminishing the Catholic presence of our early history,” she said.

Maybe the increasing Hispanic population in the United States will one day spark greater interest in our country’s Catholic roots. We’ll see.

But in the meantime, Catholics would do well to adopt Menendez’s example of beginning the Thanksgiving celebration with Mass.

Most parishes offer a Mass on Thanksgiving morning.

This year, that is especially appropriate.

First reason: “Eucharist,” of course, comes from the Greek word meaning thanksgiving. “The Greek words eucharistein and eulogein recall the Jewish blessings that proclaim — especially during a meal — God’s works: creation, redemption, and sanctification” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1328).

So, there’s no better way to express our thanksgiving than by participating in Mass.

Second reason: The first weekend after Thanksgiving, we’ll be using the new translation of the Mass prayers.

It will likely be awkward at first as we stumble through wording changes in prayers that some of us probably have as deeply familiar as the way we draw a breath. But that discomfort is also an opportunity for a fresh look at what we’re saying in these prayers. And that can lead to an increased sense of thanksgiving in this gift of himself, under the guise of bread and wine, God makes freely to us and which we can take so easily for granted.

Happy Thanksgiving!