

GIVING THANKS

We have just celebrated Thanksgiving Day. President George Washington was the first to declare such a day of thanksgiving in 1789. He did so, as he stated, that "*we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks....*" The idea of a national day of thanksgiving occurred in 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln declared such a day, following decisive victories by the Union armies at Gettysburg and Vicksburg during the Civil War.

The holiday has become a day of feasting and celebration, usually with parades and football games. Nevertheless, many do stop to thank a providential God. Those that do, usually give thanks for the "good" things. We tend to be thankful for good health, success in life, wonderful families, a good financial position, and the like. I doubt if many express gratitude for the difficult situations in their lives. Southerners would not have thanked God for losing the Civil War. Nor do men get on their knees to thank the Almighty for their favorite team having lost the game. Very few see in a sickness any reason to express gratitude; although, some do.

This month and next, I will have made my annual visitation to four of our six state correctional institutions. Several of the inmates have told me that incarceration has been a blessing for them. While some are still alive, as a result of being taken off the street, many have found a revived life in Christ, thanks to the pastoral zeal of our chaplains. None of them would have chosen to be imprisoned. Yet, precisely because they are, they have had the opportunity of encountering the Lord, which they would not have had otherwise.

The patron saint of prisoners is Saint Dismas, the so-called "good thief." At the moment of his execution, which he would not have chosen, he encountered Jesus. If he had not been crucified, he would not have turned to Christ and, so, would not have heard the words, "*This day you will be with me in paradise.*" Christ, himself, had to undergo death and what appeared as failure in order to gain victory and life.

We, as a Diocesan Church, have gone through some difficult times in the past several years. While I did not expect that becoming your bishop would entail such severe challenges, I believe that they have brought us face to face with the suffering Lord. Consequently, they have made a better assembly of believers out of us and, hopefully, made of me a better bishop. In that sense, they have been a blessing.

There are many things for which we need to be thankful. United Flight 93 did not hit any building in Washington, D.C. or in our area. All nine miners trapped in the Que Creek Mine accident were rescued. We have not had to experience the damaging weather of other parts of our nation. And, then, there are the more personal joys and successes of individuals and families.

Right now, our Allegheny Mountains look rather drab. But, in the Spring, they will come to life and take on a beauty that they would not have had if were not for Winter. My driveway is lined with rose bushes that look pathetic at this time. Yet, I know that the driveway will be lined with hundreds of roses once a new season of life and beauty comes to be. Carbon, which is worthless in itself, with time and stress, becomes a diamond of great value.

Thanks be to our loving Lord for giving us the trials and tribulations that make of us a people that He can call his own.