

**An Essay  
Four Days of Thanksgiving  
by Sister Mary José Hobday, OSF**

*"We fail to see, as we would if we were really observant, that the things we have - especially the important things - are indeed gifts that we have received from the earth, from each other, and, when all is said and done, from God."*

**Thanksgiving. It has different meanings for different people.** For some, it is an extended holiday weekend. For others, a day of thanks that may or may not include church. For still others, it's a day to gather the family around a big meal, with vague notions of Indians and Pilgrims in the background.

For Native Americans, it may be a sad day of remembering what they lost because of the appearance of another culture with different values and customs. Among younger tribal members, it is often a day of protesting and calling attention to grievances.

For me, the meaning of thanksgiving has been enriched by my Native American background, especially by the traditions of the Seneca Iroquois Tribe, which are extensive and thought provoking. This tribe has one celebration of giving thanks, for instance, that lasts four full days. It has a formal order consisting of storytelling, teachings, silence, singing, drumming, chanting, rest, the serving of special foods (including the sacred berry of the tribe, the strawberry), and remembering all of the things for which to be thankful.

To help remember, the ritual has 16 special chants of thanks. They are for people, the earth, plants, water, trees, animals, birds, the "sisters," (special powers that help people take care of themselves and look after each other), the wind, thunderors (powers that bring rain), the sun, the moon, the stars, the Four Beings (powers that bring enlightenment and strength), Handsome Lake (a member of the tribe who was particularly effective in spreading Christian values), and, finally, the Creator.

In this ritual, the chanting of the story of thanksgiving might begin like this: "Now the people have gathered to give thanks. In the early times~ the Sky Dwellers (beings in Native American origin stories who came to earth and helped Populatcit) told us we must move about the earth with love. They said the first thing we must do when we meet one another is be thankful for each other. Above all, we must relate to the earth as our mother, who supports all, even our very feet." It continues litany-like in this fashion.

I like this ritual because of its this world focus, and that's one reason I think it's worth passing on to the Christian community in this country as we approach our great national holiday, Thanksgiving. Often we take all that we have for granted.

Or, we think that we have earned everything we have. We fail to see, as we would if we were really observant, that the things we have - especially the important things - are indeed gifts that we have received from the earth, from each other, and, when all is said and done, from God. Or, if we are thankful to God, we don't really appreciate the fact that God has given us all the gifts we have, including life itself, through creation. I'm afraid we still think of the Creator as completely separate from creation, and, by doing that, we perpetuate the old dichotomies that have plagued us in the past.

As you can see from this Seneca Iroquois ritual of thanksgiving, Native American people have less difficulty with this. Somehow, they were able to keep their focus on this world longer than many of us Christians, and they still were able to relate it to the Creator. Note this, for example, in the 16 thanksgiving chants of this ritual -the first 15 are about creation and then comes the Creator.

The point here is not necessarily to duplicate this Native American ritual of thanksgiving - can you imagine yourself giving thanks for four solid days? - but to appreciate the profound sense of thanksgiving Native Americans have. Native peoples, I think, have avoided the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. In this way, Native Americans can enrich the celebration of this greatest American feast - Thanksgiving - and our more important Christian celebration of thanks - the Eucharist.

*Sister Mary José Hobday was one of two keynoters featured at The Episcopal Network for Stewardship 2002 Annual Leadership Development Conference June 20 - 22 in Washington, DC.*

*This essay is reprinted with permission from <<http://gratefulness.org>>.*