

UP front

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With a small “t,” thanksgiving, per Merriam-Webster is “a public acknowledgement or celebration of divine goodness,” and “a prayer expressing gratitude.”

The notion of a Godly component to its etymology is consistent among sources like The Oxford English and Cambridge dictionaries, too.

With a big “T,” Thanksgiving is a predominantly-North-American holiday, first celebrated by European settlers in the “New World” to honor God for providing their first harvests. Thanksgiving, as a concept – typically a form of fall, post-farming festival – is celebrated by various cultures around the globe. Thanksgiving as a national holiday exists in the U.S., Canada, Liberia, and Saint Lucia. As Liberia was founded by freed slaves and their descendants returning to Africa, the country has long been linked closely to America. But why Saint Lucia?

The namesake of the Caribbean Island inspired some of the earliest Western end-of-autumn celebrations through the tales of her life and death. According to accounts from *The Acts of Martyrdom* and *The Vatican News*, Lucia (Lucy) was born at the end of the third century in Syracuse (the one in Sicily, not upstate New York) into a wealthy, high-ranking family. Her father died during Lucy’s early childhood, and she was raised by her mother, Eutychia, who promised her daughter in marriage to a powerful pagan man. Lucy, however, felt a strong spiritual calling and secretly longed from a life of chastity devoted to divine service. After a pilgrimage to Catania, where Eutychia’s chronic bleeding was healed at Saint Agatha’s tomb, Lucy shared her intention with her mother and asked for her dowry to be given to the poor in her town. The man who wanted to marry Lucy was not happy and outed her as a Christian (an illegal status) to the emperor’s men. The local prefect scoffed at Lucy’s commitment to chastity and Christianity, and delivered her to a local brothel, but Lucy did not submit. Soldiers were unable to move her, as she exhibited supernatural strength. She was tied and bound to oxen. The men tortured and blinded her, but Lucy endured. She was burned, but the fire didn’t kill her. Ultimately, she was beheaded on December 13, 304.

Because she was blinded by men but clear-eyed about her commitment to God, Lucy is the patron saint of the

blind. Interestingly, Lucia seems to be derived from the Latin word “lux,” meaning “light.” And Lucy’s feast day coincides with the anniversary of her death, occurring near the winter solstice, the darkest day of the year, after which the world enjoys increasing light.

In southern European cultures, there’s an ancient tradition that marks the start of Christmas celebrations and honors Lucy. Men who operate village olive oil presses set fire to wicker mats used to collect and process olives, and parade through town with the burning cloths held high on heavy sticks. This is an offering of thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary for a fruitful harvest, another link between agricultural success and gratitude to a divine force.

What’s the point? Over time, things evolve. People change. They move from place to place. Traditions morph to suit current conditions. But some things remain consistent. Like the human need to feel the possibility of light and hope and the impulse to express gratitude when this possibility is realized.

At my home, things will be different from the norm this year. Neither of my daughters are “coming home” for Thanksgiving. They will celebrate with their husband and boyfriend, respectively, the four together, but not here. None of these four young adults will feast at their long-familiar tables and subsequently fall asleep in their childhood beds. Yet I am thankful. Very thankful. For my wife (this is our first Thanksgiving as a married couple) and our parents, all four of whom are living in the same town as we are. And I am thankful that my kids have lives that are full in their own chosen homes. I will miss them; we will miss them, but the light approaches, as Santa Lucia affirms. Christmas is coming quickly, and we’ll all be together, as it always has been.

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