



CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

A Thanksgiving reflection

From CWS Executive Director and CEO Rev. John L. McCullough



"The Landing of the Pilgrims," by Bacon

This Rock has become an object of veneration in the United States. I have seen bits of it carefully preserved in several towns in the Union. Does this sufficiently show that all human power and greatness is in the soul of man? Here is a stone which the feet of a few outcasts pressed for an instant; and the stone becomes famous; it is treasured by a great nation; its very dust is shared as a relic.

Alexis DeTocqueville, 1835

Growing up in Massachusetts I remember making a family pilgrimage to visit Plymouth Rock – actually several pilgrimages. As a boy I was amazed to learn that people traveled from across the United States to pay homage to this historical site. To be honest, if you haven't visited it, there really isn't very much to it. After all, it is just a rock. I always found the replicas of the Plymouth Plantation and the Mayflower, the cranberry bogs, the variety of museums, and especially the rock candy and the salt water taffy far more interesting. I can understand why DeTocqueville questioned America's fascination with this rock.

Legend suggests that it has become traditional that each generation of the original families landing in Plymouth verifies for the next the "rock" as the authentic place where the Pilgrims first set foot in the New World. This is perhaps America's most unique example of oral tradition.

DeTocqueville was a noted French political thinker and historian. When he wrote, "Here is a stone which the feet of a few outcasts pressed for an instant", he stated the

very thing that would captivate his curiosity about these early Americans. His writings revealed that he found the degree to which the colonists seemingly valued *liberty and equality* in contrast to Europeans worthy of his study as a political scientist.

When these Pilgrims, who survived the travails of a treacherous ocean voyage, first stepped upon this rock they must have felt the rush of the liberty and equality that long had eluded them. The persecution of the Old World melted away – they were made new again. This is an important part for which they gave thanks during the first Thanksgiving.

The lesson of *liberty and equality* was not an easy one for the Pilgrims, not only because of the persecution they fled, but perhaps more so due to the terrible human toll they suffered after landing in Plymouth. Having arrived by mid-December, they simply were not prepared for the harsh winter, with food already in very limited supply. Forced to live onboard the Mayflower throughout the season, their exposure to the weather, malnutrition, and illness led to the deaths of over half of the community. It was March, when they again disembarked. Samoset, of the Abenaki Sagamore tribe, welcomed them, and soon thereafter a Wampanoag tribal leader named Massasoit recommended the land where they should settle, showed them how to prepare the soil, and what crops to plant. It was then that the Pilgrims began to experience equality and, in turn, their liberation. This combination of hospitality and the abundant harvest that followed also was impetus for the first *Thanksgiving*.

I hope that during this season you, and those who share space around your table, will also feel the exhilaration of the thing for which to give thanks. No matter how innocuous to others it might seem, contemplate how your moments of *thanksgiving* have become sources of liberation and empowerment in your life.

And then pause to remember those for whom this feeling of exhilaration remains elusive: those who continue to traverse treacherous seas looking for that rock which for them too can become famous, and treasured, and whose very dust is shared like a relic.

Let us pray for the day when we can share a global day of *Thanksgiving*, when all of humanity will feel capable, *new again*, and free.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a smaller "ohn" following.

Rev. John L. McCullough
Executive Director and CEO
Church World Service

P.S. While Thanksgiving is a uniquely American holiday, these two prayers from international colleagues capture for me the spirit of the occasion. We invite you to share them at your table.

O God, we thank you for the gift of life. We thank you for the nourishment you provide us every day so we can lead a healthy life in body, mind and spirit.

Help us to overcome greed. Help us to understand that happiness and joy do not necessarily come from riches or material wealth, but from the freedom we have and the depth of the relationship we form with you, as we strive to build a community of justice, love, and peace.

Bartholomew Shaha, Bangladesh, secretary general, World Alliance of YMCAs, Geneva, Switzerland. Appears in *In God's Hands: Common Prayer for the World*, edited by Hugh McCullum and Terry MacArthur, World Council of Churches, 2006. Permission granted to Church World Service for reuse.

All hands together
to change the world.
All hands together
to till the land.
All hands together
to pull up weeds.
All hands together
to share our joy.

Pastoral team of Bambamarca, Peru - song from *Vamos Caminando: A Peruvian Catechism* (SCM Press, 1985). Appears in *Bread for Tomorrow* edited by Janet Morley and published by Christian Aid, London, 1982. Permission granted to Church World Service for reuse.