

During the darkest period of the Christian Church's early history, times of thanksgiving alternated with less solemn fasts and days of humiliation. Socrates, a Greek ecclesiastical historian of the fifth century, says rightly that neither Jesus nor His Apostles left any commands in regard to such days. The early Christians, however, observed the week in which they believed our Lord's passion to have taken place as a time of fasting and humiliation, and Easter Sunday, or the day of Resurrection, as one of special joy. But the old day of Pentecost, with all its Christian associations, was the time above all others when their souls became joyful amid their tribulations. From Easter till Pentecost, they no longer knelt at prayer as during the rest of the year, but stood erect, to show that Jesus had raised the suppliant for pardon to a glorious standing by his resurrection. And on the day itself they continually glorified God, because, as Chrysostom says, His son Jesus "has presented the first fruits of our nature to His Father, and the Father has found such pleasure in this offering, on account of the dignity of him who presents it to Him, and of the holiness of the offering itself, that He has taken it into His own hands, has placed it near Him, and said 'sit thou at my right hand.' Often has Heaven bestowed rich gifts upon the human race, but never has its magnificence been signalized by such striking wonders as this day brought to light. God caused manna to rain upon his people, and nourished them with bread from Heaven. Soon after, a fire kindled by the anger of Heaven consumed an impure sacrifice offered by the same people. In the time of Elias, an abundant rain, following a period of frightful drought, gave back its fertility to the earth. But the prodigies which this day recalls to our minds, bear away the palm from all such events as these. It is no longer the manna of the desert, the fire or the rain from Heaven; it is an effusion of the gifts and graces of the Spirit. We see not rains that fertilize the earth, but those which prepare our human nature and make it fit to bring forth the fruits of sanctification to His glory who has placed within it the seed of everlasting life." Down to the time of the Reformation, this Pentecostal feast, or Whitsuntide, as it was called, was the principal time of thanksgiving in the Church, although many fixed holidays were added to it by the ecclesiastical authorities, and seasons of peculiar prosperity, or the gaining of a victory, were made the occasions of special rejoicings before God by Christian rulers. The Reformation swept away, in the majority of the Churches which arose from it, the Whitsuntide and other holidays. Without prescribing any special times of national or general thanksgiving, their Confessions or Declarations of Principles, like our own Westminster Confession, recommended "solemn fastings and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are in their several times and seasons to be used in a holy and religious manner." These occasions, we find, were frequently taken advantage of, and under right-minded rulers often each year had its memorial day. Among the remains of the pious Matthew Henry is a sermon preached on the National Thanksgiving day, December 31, 1706. "Among other feasts of the Lord," he says, "which the Jewish Church was appointed to observe (and many annual feasts they had for one fast), one is called the Feast of Ingathering, at the end of the year, according to the civil computation of their year. The feast we are this day solemnizing with joy, in communion with all the religious assemblies of our land, being appointed by authority, may be looked upon as our Feast of Ingathering; in it we appear before the Lord, in whom all our joys must terminate, and to whom all our trophies must be consecrated. Remember, therefore, the