

The Gaffigan family Christmas photo for 2020: "Merry Christmas From a Safe Distance." (Provided photo)



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The Gaffigan family loves Christmas traditions. This is ironic because, most years, my husband Jim and I and our five children are unable to partake in many holiday traditions due to our line of work. Precisely at the time of year when many people are able to take time off to be with their families, we are at our busiest, because that's when people are most likely to go out to see theater, concerts and comedy shows.

In normal years, our family has always found ways to adapt and tries to work in our traditions wherever we find ourselves. The seven of us have managed to find a way to be together wherever in the world we are. That became our tradition. Being together. We have made togetherness on holidays a priority and a commitment.

Thanksgiving can be a challenge. Even before this year, we could pretty much guarantee that we can *never* be with extended family on Thanksgiving. Unless we happen to be performing close to where they live, we are usually unable to celebrate this holiday with our relatives. For our immediate family, Thanksgiving usually means finding a place for a big family dinner. The seven of us have had Thanksgiving dinner everywhere — from a casino restaurant in Las Vegas to a tiny family eatery in Athens. I think one year the Gaffigan Thanksgiving meal was in the Hobbit Tavern in New Zealand! No matter where we are, we always say a family prayer of thanksgiving. No matter where we are, we make this happen. A movable Gaffigan feast!

Christmas presents the same logistical and geographical challenges, but we always go to Christmas Mass — actually two Masses: once on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas Day. Sadly, only once in the last 16 years have we been able to attend Christmas Mass at our beloved home parish — St. Patrick's Old Cathedral Basilica in New York City — because we are usually out of town.

In the 10 years we performed on New Years' Eve at The Pabst Theater in my hometown of Milwaukee, we usually attended Mass at whatever parish and time fit best into our hectic schedule of family gatherings and dinners. And anyone from Milwaukee can tell you there's an abundance of options for going to Christmas Mass, since there is a Catholic church on practically every corner, and a liquor store or a

bar on the other. (OK, sometimes two bars.)

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Each year, we'd have a packed itinerary for visiting our ever-expanding mix of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, childhood friends and neighbors over the holidays. We had to be flexible. Once our schedule of gatherings, meals and gift exchanges was set, we looked for a vigil Mass on masstimes.org that lined up conveniently with Christmas Eve dinner.

Midnight Mass is not a Gaffigan Christmas tradition. We learned this the hard way. Who would have thought going to a packed church in the middle of the night with a bunch of small children and nowhere to sit is the perfect recipe for an enormous large-Catholic-family fail? For our family, going to a vigil Mass before our family dinner became our tradition. We'd also find a Christmas Day Mass close to noon, hopefully somewhere between our hotel and my parents' house.

Our tradition began when we would journey from our hotel on the afternoon of Christmas Eve to the (hopefully) family-friendly vigil Mass. Everyone would be dressed in their Christmas outfits, we'd stuff a bag with wipes, crayons and an extra pair of tights (a little girl falling down in an icy church parking lot and ruining her cute white tights was an annual Gaffigan Christmas tradition), and load everyone into the rental car and turn on the GPS.

Just as we pulled up to the church, we'd remember that being 20 minutes early for Christmas Eve Mass is exactly equal to being 20 minutes late for regular Mass. When you go to Christmas Mass at an unfamiliar parish, you don't know any of those parking tricks that your parents were experts at in your childhood. So another Gaffigan Christmas tradition is Jim dropping the rest of the family off in front of the church, driving around for 20 minutes until he finds a parking space, walking back to the church, and then trying to find the rest of us, who would be packed in like sardines with everyone else who couldn't find a seat. Some years, a bossy usher would split us up and seat us wherever there was room in a pew.

But it is beautiful seeing all the families together, fresh flowers everywhere, the smell of incense, the warm yellow light of the candles. And if you're lucky, you'll even get a peek at the beautiful giant crèche on the altar when going up to receive

the Eucharist. As chaotic as it sounds (and it is), this is a wonderful family tradition. And celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas Mass is a tradition that millions of Catholics around the globe are sharing with you in unity, solidarity and peace.

For many Catholics, this year is going to be much different.

This really hit home for me a couple of days ago when my friend called to tell me that one of her daughter's classmates tested positive for COVID-19. The entire class and their families were told to quarantine for 14 days. Their large family had been helping to coordinate a big pre-Christmas volunteer project to deliver gifts and cards to an organization in need. We had to scramble to figure out how we could do it without them.

That was when it struck me that there will be many families facing a "Quarantined Christmas" this year. All of us have had to cancel plans over the past 10 months: weddings, birthday parties, going to work or school, vacations. Having to cancel Christmas plans on top of everything seems particularly cruel.

When public Mass was cancelled this Easter, I think we were still in so much shock that it went by without much question. Churches were closed anyway. We got used to watching Mass on television and praying together on Zoom. But now it's different. We have adapted. We wear masks. We wash our hands. Many of us are going to Mass again, signing up in advance, keeping social distance, skipping the sign of peace. So many of our parishes have adapted very well and have worked hard to keep us safe while ensuring that the lambs continue to be fed.

But now Christmas is nearly upon us. For Catholics, it doesn't even really feel like Christmas without going to Mass. Sadly, many of us won't be able to this year due to quarantine, sickness, vulnerability, or concern about spreading the virus. Once this reality sets in, suddenly the importance of being at Mass on Christmas seems like everything. As Joni Mitchell might say, "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got til it's gone?"

Sure, there are many, many "Christmassy" things that we do besides go to Mass. Sometimes, regrettably, we give more priority to these so-called Christmas activities than to the Mass. Even the most faithful Catholics can fall into the trap of treating Christmas Mass as if it was just another obligation to tick off on our busy Christmas schedule.

In 2020, maybe God wants us to find new ways to honor him in our own humble stables, so that our own quarantined "holy families" can enter into a deeper communion with the birth of Jesus Christ. Yes, we can stream Christmas Mass — we can even join Pope Francis at St. Peter's Basilica! We can (and should) make an Act of Spiritual Communion if we can't attend in person. But there are many other ways we and our families can help make our celebration of the birth of Jesus incredible, without feeling we are "missing out" this year.

For suggestions about how to make this Christmas meaningful, I reached out to Catholics from all over. Here are some of their responses.

Kristin Reilly, a working mom with seven kids and a career in finance, runs a ministry that brings together hundreds of people every morning to pray the rosary on Instagram live. She told me that this Christmas, her family will "celebrate Jesus' birthday by baking a cake. Each of my children will also give Him a gift. For example, my 5-year-old promised to be nice to her siblings because that would make Jesus happy. My 10-year-old said he would pray a Christmas rosary. My 7-year-old will Facetime his grandparents to tell them how much he loves them." Find Kristen on Instagram: @onehailmaryatatime and @manyhailmarysatatime.

Melinda Ribnek, a Catholic writer and mom of seven in California, told me, "Now more than ever, there are ample opportunities for charity. For example, although we won't be able to take our children to nursing homes this year, they still accept Christmas cards. How much more these handmade cards must mean in a year of such intensified loneliness!"

Rachel Amiri, a mom of three from St. Louis, Missouri, is planning to read the Nativity story on Christmas morning as the first gift her family will receive. "We want them to know that God came to be with us at Christmas and is with us still, and that we are never alone." Her husband Dan Amiri, a contributing writer to Where Peter Is, will focus on the ambiance. "We're not sure exactly how it will look, but like the Easter Vigil prayer we did at home, it will definitely involve candles."

My friend Greg Iwinski, a comedy writer in New York City, wants his family to bring the Christmas story to life. "Tip: Find your nearest baby (don't break quarantine) or baby-sized pet and do a living Nativity. Nothing says Christmas Miracle like trying to get your toddler to sit still in a trough."

The Iwinskis and the Amiris are not the only ones emphasizing their family crèche this year. Sam Rocha, a Catholic husband and father living in Alberta, Canada, has planned a new addition for his family. He told me, "This Christmas, we are marking the birth of our newborn Savior by welcoming a newborn Silver Labrador named Lucius into our family. St. Francis made the Nativity come alive by bringing barn animals into the church, and we will mark it by bringing this special animal into our domestic church."

Catholic musician Matt Maher is taking the opportunity to share the lesson of "Not my will but yours be done" with his children during this unique Advent and Christmas season. "This Advent has created opportunities to talk to our kids about the season and what is most important; to refocus on the gift of each other, and also identify more with the very real interruption that is the will of God in our lives." Check out Matt's terrific album as well as his beautiful children's book, #TheAdventofChristmas.

Gloria Purvis is an author, speaker, radio talk show host, and an advocate for racial justice and protection of life from the womb to the tomb. She plans to make room at her table for the real guest of honor. "One way people can keep Christmas holy is by having an extra seat at the table reserved for Jesus Christ," she told me. Her family also plans to pray together at the first appearance of starlight and to sing each of their favorite Christmas carols.

Dawn Eden Goldstein, author of *My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints*, says that no matter whether she is at Mass in person or in spirit, Christmas is a time to "thank God for making me reborn in Christ through my baptism, and I will at the same time ask Christ to be born in me."

My friend Mike Lewis, the editor of Where Peter Is, said his family has been preparing meals for the local homeless shelter this Advent. "It is important to be grateful for what we do have and to always remember that there are others in need. Pope Francis said it well in his Angelus this week, 'Instead of complaining in these difficult times about what the pandemic prevents us from doing, let us do something for someone who has less.' "

Catholics are being called to have faith, perhaps more now than ever before, that by the light of Christ, we can get through this together and come out better on the other side.

Merry Christmas, everyone!