

DID YOU KNOW . . .

That it IS possible to have a fairly stress-free and inexpensive Christmas? It may mean a change from Christmases of the past, or even from what you had hoped for this year, but when the season is over, it just may turn out to be one of the best Christmases of all.

In today's economy, too many parents are feeling stressed about finances and finding ways to meet all of the expectations that have come to signify Christmas—a big tree with sparkling decorations, lots of gifts (whether we can afford them or not), large dinners and sometimes hosting or attending many parties, and the biggest challenge of all, trying to make all of your child's wishes come true. For many families, this may not be possible or even desirable.

As members of the Catholic community, let's take a moment to reflect on the story of the first Christmas—the birth of the Savior, Jesus. He didn't have a three star hotel, the finest bed linens, servants to care for Him, or gourmet meals. He was born into a life of poverty and humility, to teach us about the most important things in this life.

A wonderful Hallmark Channel movie tells the tale of an elderly woman who is teaching a younger man about the meaning of Christmas. To do so, she asks him to consider the first gift of Christmas. After much thought, he tells her it was love. She smiles and replies that his response is a good start, but later in the film, he realizes that the first gift of Christmas was a child, who was given to the world because of the love of God. God sacrificed His only begotten son for us, and that is what Christmas is really all about, not going far into debt to purchase gifts that in many cases, will soon be forgotten in the quest for something else. It is also not about outdoing your neighbors or even meeting anyone else's expectations of what you should do.

To honor the true spirit of Christmas, try taking yourself and your family back to the roots of the holiday and to simpler times. In the early days of Christianity, just as in the early days of our country, there were few if any gifts that were purchased. Most gifts were handmade with readily available materials, so why not look around to see what you can do to save money and still give a thoughtful gift? In fact, the gifts that are handmade are generally customized in that they are created specifically for the recipient. They are gifts of time and talent in addition to materials.

If you have young children, sit them down with inexpensive art paper and crayons, paints, or whatever materials you have and have them draw pictures for members of the family, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. The young child's "signature" can be a handprint in paint or traced by a parent. An inexpensive frame at a discount store will complete the gift for very little money. Gift bags are sold very affordably at many discount stores, or children can use stamps and other art materials to decorate plain paper and make it wrapping paper. Even better, let the children wrap the gift themselves. Family members treasure these handmade gifts, much to our chagrin when we become adults. To the day my mother died, she refused to throw out the Styrofoam Christmas ornaments I made in first grade, and I am sure there are many others out there who could find similar ancient relics in a family member's attic or basement. I groaned every time she brought them out, but they always brought a smile to her face, and that's what it's all about, isn't it?

For an older child, let her write a story, draw the pictures, and put it into a folder as a book. If possible, have the book bound with a spiral binder at an office supply store. For the children who are older, they can type their favorite stories of loved ones on the computer and create a lasting memory album, with some copies of favorite photos of the family members. Another affordable idea is a family photo taken on your own digital camera and printed and framed.

For those who are handy with crafts, try making homemade ornaments. Have a family night where you make and bottle your family's favorite Marinara sauce or jam and give those as gifts. Bake batches of cookies together and make up gift platters for friends. If you are part of a large family, have a drawing where each family buys a gift for one other family in the larger family constellation, rather than gifts for each person. Or, if this is not in the budget, give gifts of service to family members. Help your older family members label and organize all those old photos sitting in shoe boxes, and while you're at it, record some of their wonderful stories before it's too late. You never know what you might learn about your family history. Or, try watching old family videos and telling your favorite stories about each other—the laughs will surely reduce stress. Grandparents would enjoy having a driveway or sidewalk shoveled or may need a ride somewhere; children appreciate an evening of personalized attention such as making pizzas and popcorn watching videos while you babysit and give the parents a break. There are countless ideas for service, and some families elect to limit gifts to just one or two items for each immediate family member and give gifts of service outside the home, such as volunteering at a food pantry or soup kitchen. If your family is musically inclined, try performing at a nursing home and leading a sing-along, or entertaining at a local children's hospital or shelter. If your children have toys they no longer use, but that are still in good condition, help them clean them and take them to the Salvation Army or some other place where they can bring joy to another child. It is never too early to teach children the value of giving and serving.

And please give up the notion that the house and the food have to be perfect in order to create a memorable Christmas. One of my favorite Christmas memories was going to the rural South to visit relatives and going to a small church Christmas pageant. The littlest angel was far from well-behaved, causing giggles and hilarity all through the service (except for when she nearly fell on her head while trying to hang upside down in the pew—trust me, it was a memorable evening)! At the end of the service, all of the children present received brown paper bags with apples, oranges, nuts and candy. That bag was a far cry from my usual Christmas bounty, but there was something honest and oh so touching about being reminded that in years gone by, that would have been a better gift than gold for children who had very little all year long. To this day, the aroma of a fresh orange takes me back to that simple Christmas in Alabama long ago.

Let the children decorate if they are old enough, ask relatives to do a potluck Christmas dinner, or try exploring the traditions of other countries, where less money is spent and gifts are not so lavish. This year, let the true spirit of Christmas take center stage, rather than the commercial holiday we have come to know and expect. Reduce your stress by doing less and spending less, while also improving the quality of your celebrations. Take time to actually talk and play with your children, appreciate your parents and express thanks to your loved ones. Life can be fragile and unexpectedly short at times, so it is important to make memories while you can. You know the old saying, "You can't take it with you," and that is correct. There isn't one thing that can be wrapped in fancy paper and put under the tree that you can take with you when it's time to end your life's journey, but there is good news. What you *can* take with you doesn't cost a thing! The love and memories of time well spent with those who are most precious to you will go with you when you return to sit at the feet of the Savior. Honor His gift to you by showing His love to those around you through simple acts of kindness and thoughtfulness. And if your children resist such a Christmas, my colleague Maria Aguiar has the best Christmas idea I have ever heard. She and her husband have always told their children that Jesus only got three gifts for His birthday and no one is more worthy than Jesus, so they don't get more than three gifts, either. Try focusing on celebrating Christ's birth rather than on stacking up gifts under the tree. Throw a birthday party for Jesus and give gifts of service in His name. They don't cost a thing, but they sure give back to

you. That warm feeling you get from helping someone else may just be one of the best gifts you get this year!

May the gift of the Savior's birth touch your heart and your family this Christmas season--it is a treasure beyond compare. The staff at CSS joins me in wishing everyone a blessed Christmas and a healthy, happy, and prosperous New Year!

Debora Jones

P.S. Please remember to check out the News page to learn more about another important stress reduction tool that is free. It's the new crisis nursery in Leicester (see www.babysbreathhome.org) and it is there to provide child care in case of a family emergency or in times of parental stress. It is not foster care—it is a service that gives parents a much needed break so that they don't snap and cause abuse. This is one of the best tools for reducing stress, especially for single or low-income parents who do not have other resources, so please contact them if you feel you need a break. Their number is: (508) 892-0009. Take care and remember take a break when you need it—it will make you an even better parent!