

It's the Most Wonderful Time of Year

This blog post was originally published on USCCB's For Your Marriage website, as a part of the series "Keep the Faith" by Rob and Kathy Hayes.

Over the years, we've learned how to keep our sanity, but more importantly how to stay focused on the joyful message of Christmas and the preparation period of Advent.

We readily admit that some years we've felt a fair amount of stress as Christmas approaches. We're certainly not immune to the various pressures and traditions that "we just have to keep." Although there is no magic formula for a stress-free December, over our three decades of marriage we've settled into several traditions that help keep the focus on Christ's birth and contribute to what makes the season unique for our family.

Every year we celebrate Advent, Saint Nicholas (December 6), Saint Lucy (December 13), Saint Stephen (December 26), and Epiphany (January 6 or the Sunday after the Feast of Mary Mother of God). Our current parish also has a carol sing the Sunday evening before Christmas, which is always a great pause from the busyness leading up to the holiday. If that weren't enough, we celebrate our engagement date (two days prior to Christmas) by going out to dinner as a deliberate pause for the two of us amid all the activity.

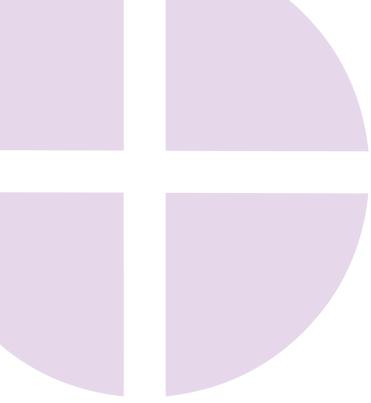
We enjoy having an Advent Wreath on our kitchen table from the first Sunday of Advent until Christmas. We typically put up our



Christmas decorations no earlier than two weeks before Christmas. This way, we're not tired of them by the time Christmas arrives and we're happy to keep them up through Epiphany to celebrate the entirety of the Christmas season.

Being a Coast Guard family, we often were not near our extended family, so our Christmas day was usually joyful but calm. We weren't on a tight schedule of trying to get to gatherings hosted by other family members. While we were stationed in the Washington, DC area, we started a tradition of attending noon Mass on December 26th for the Feast of St. Stephen at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception followed by a matinee movie (the only time in the year we see a movie in the theater) and dinner out.

We both come from families of generous gift-giving and wanted to keep gift-giving in perspective, so we settled on three gifts (plus a stocking) for our children — similar to Jesus' three gifts from the Magi. This tradition helped keep the volume of gifts in balance with what we were actually celebrating, especially when our children were younger.



Special meals are a big part of our Christmas traditions, so we have specific favorite meals and desserts for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Our schedule on Christmas Eve includes a fancy dinner, a picture of the kids dressed up in front of the tree, and then Christmas Eve Mass. Afterwards, the kids exchange their gifts with each other per the gift exchange they organize among themselves each year.

For many years we hosted an Epiphany party for our friends as a way to celebrate the end of the Christmas season. It was a great way to celebrate the close of the season, and there was less stress and less competition with other events, as it was after Christmas.

So, as Advent and Christmas approach, we look forward to our traditions to help us focus on the reason for the season. We pray for peace and hope in the coming of our Savior to displace our stress so that we may enjoy this wonderful time of the year.

Keep the Faith.