

A Catholic mom's guide for having a less-materialistic Christmas

By Simcha Fisher

America Magazine - December 5, 2025

How do we keep our celebration of Christmas from getting too materialistic?

I have bad news: If it is this point in the year and you are just now worrying about it, it's probably too late. The way we celebrate Christmas tends to reflect the way we live in general.

If you and your family are constantly thinking about shopping and upgrading and keeping up with TikTok influencers, then Christmas will be the same, just with more jingle bells. If you and your family rarely think of people in need, and then you suddenly decide halfway through December to throw some money at a toy drive or a food pantry, then it will feel artificial and performative because it is. If Mass and other religious practices are something you grudgingly fit into your ordinary life if you have time and are in the mood, then that is how the Nativity of the Lord will be.

We are more consistent than we realize. Your Christmas will look the way you have decided to live. So, if you are materialistic all year long, then yes, your Christmas will almost certainly be materialistic. Sorry!

But I did say "almost certainly." The reason is this: I know very few self-identifying Catholics who really celebrate Christmas in the hyper-materialistic way I described above. I read about such things online—kids flipping out because their new Audi isn't the color they wanted or wives refusing to come out of their rooms because last year's diamond was bigger—but in real life, all the people I know who are worried about materialism swallowing up Christmas really just mean: "Presents are a big part of Christmas at our house, and that makes me feel weird."

Don't feel weird. It's O.K. Presents are nice, and they are a normal and morally neutral way to express love to each other (and sometimes, a way to keep the peace in the family, and that's not necessarily wrong either). Just because money has changed hands and wrapping paper is involved, that doesn't mean you have violated the spirit of the Incarnation.

What I used to tell my kids, back when they listened to me, was that Christmas is baby Jesus' birthday, and the only present he wants from us is for us to be good to one another. But there is no reason that being good to one another cannot take the form, in part, of buying or making presents. That is part of incarnational living: Expressing love through physical means. Buying or making a thoughtful, meaningful gift that you can reasonably expect to bring happiness to someone else is a far holier thing than dourly insisting that our Lord and savior is sick and tired of all this merriness.

We do need to remember the poor (on Christmas, and every day), and we do need to worship the Lord (on Christmas and every day), and we do need to be good to each other in intangible ways (on Christmas, and every day). It is also perfectly fine to mark the season by having fancy cookies and buying electronics for one another. It is a big holiday. There is room for a lot of different ways to celebrate.

There is more good news. When I said worrying about Christmas in late November or early December is probably too late, I didn't really mean it. Even if things have gone off the rails during the year, there are some things you can do to reshape your Christmas right away, without attempting to radically re-route your entire family culture. You can make sure Christmas music playlists include some songs that are actually about Jesus and not just being vaguely jolly and having a lot of cocktails. You can get the family to pitch in to a last-minute donation for someone less fortunate—even if it's just awkwardly thrusting a \$20 bill at a single mom at Mass and shouting "Christmas present!" before scurrying away. Just do it, and tell everyone that it's a tradition from now on. Get as many people in your family as possible to confession during Advent, which is *the* number one way to prepare yourself for Christmas. Definitely do this. And let Christmas be the beginning of making these things year-round practices for your family.

And you can talk to your family about your worries. Don't present it in terms of, "We are enjoying ourselves a little too much, here, and we need to cram a little more Jesus into this whole operation." Don't make it religion versus fun. There are no winners in that game, I promise.

Instead, ask your family which practices and traditions feel the most meaningful to them—which ones it wouldn't feel like real Christmas without—and see how you can build on that and gently shift it toward something more profound than just presents. You may be surprised to learn how much the non-gimmie-gimmie parts mean to everyone. And you may be surprised to know that, if the shopping and the wish lists and the general galloping capitalism of it all have started to feel icky and oppressive to you, they probably feel that way to other people in your family, too, and they may be grateful for the chance to dial things down. Sometimes someone just needs to say it.

It is also good to remember that, for his birthday, Baby Jesus would like you not only to be good to other people, but to be good to yourself, and that includes not being so hard on yourself. It is really hard to be a real Christian in a culture that is...like our culture. Nobody gets it completely right, so try to remember that there is only one person who can make everybody happy, and that person is not you. There is a real virtue in doing your best to keep the season well and then turning it over to the Lord. It is his day, after all.