

## Christmas as a Catholic

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To most people today, Christmas calls to mind dozens of Christmas movies aired on ABC family, the crowds in malls fighting over the last Barbie, and the many kids clamoring for dozens of gifts stuffing their stockings. I've been lucky enough to share in the spoils, but as a Catholic, Christmas has also given me the chance to immerse myself within my religion. Through celebrating with my family and learning about the non-commercial and more Biblical roots, I have grown to be more involved in my own study of Catholicism. With the proximity to both my religion and my family that Christmas has given and continues to give me, I believe that I am able to reflect upon my religion more positively.

Without Christmas, my experiences with Catholicism would have lacked a subtle but necessary piece. I grew up in a strong Catholic environment with honest and moral role models to follow. Both of my parents were raised by devout Catholics: my grandparents, who have, in turn, become my biggest influencers of faith. I attended a small Catholic elementary school, St. John's, from preschool to sixth grade. The school implemented a mixed curriculum of traditional educational topics with a strong focus on religion. Going to a Catholic school gave me the opportunity to attend Mass weekly with school and study the history of Catholicism with my classmates. In particular, I always appreciated the unbounded celebration of religious holidays that going to a non-secular school permitted. My favorite memories of St. John's include crafting nativity scenes out of clay and countless other styrofoam and gingerbread Christmas crafts. Moving from public school to NMH has removed the focus on religion in my education, but I have been able to maintain my religious practices with the support of my family. Although my schedule at NMH has made this routine more difficult, I attend weekly Sunday mass with my family when I'm home. Growing up, I was given the opportunity to immerse myself within my religion at school, which I believe has made me more aware and thankful for my childhood.

Christmas and Catholicism have always been closely intertwined in my life, particularly through my schooling and family. My parents have always pushed me to focus not only on the commercial and entertainment values of Christmas, but primarily on how we, as Catholics, immerse ourselves in the holiday. My family has always partaken in traditional Christmas practices such as nativity scenes, holiday carols, and advent wreaths, particularly with the influence of our church. Our most cherished Christmas decoration is not the inflatable Santa that my father (reluctantly) sets out on our porch every year, or the glittery twine reindeer that parades around the house on the first of December, but rather the family nativity set. Crafted with delicate ceramic, with a sturdy barn constructed by my father many years ago, the nativity set is always the focal point of our house during Christmas. The entire family will gather in our living room and take turns unwrapping each fragile figure from their rolls of bubble wrap. With the help of my grandparents and relatives, we focus on the biblical meaning of the holiday through our use of Christmas decor—my grandma is always willing to tell the story of Jesus's

birth every year! I have learned so much about Christmas's Catholic roots through traditions such as these and am reminded every year as we decorate again and again.

By giving me the opportunity to create memories with family and friends, Christmas has granted me the chance to grow closer to my faith. When I was eight years old, as per annual tradition, my classmates and I acted out the birth of Jesus at the family Mass Christmas Eve. Our parish leaders and teachers taught us the Biblical passage involving his birth, and then we performed as characters in the narrative. Although my best friend and I both had a pleasant time dressing up and acting as Wise Men, we took our duties seriously and were largely impacted by our studies of the Catholic religion. It was my first in-depth study of the Bible, and what had seemed so intimidating before now seemed accessible and essentially interesting to my third-grade mind. Through celebrating the birth of Jesus on Christmas, my perception of studying the Bible changed in a positive way.

Christmas has a different meaning to everyone, but I consider myself lucky to spend it as a Catholic involved in my Church and my family. Growing up Catholic has pushed me to look past the immediate and flashy commercialization of the holiday and towards the religious roots. Celebrating with my friends, family, and church has given me a chance to develop a more positive perception towards Catholicism. The holiday has also allowed me to take my first steps into the Bible and given me precious moments with my family and friends learning about my religion. Without Christmas's involvement throughout my study of Catholicism, I would not feel the strong relationship to my religion that I feel now.