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Bishop Caggiano (opinion): 'We need to rethink how we live our holidays'

By Bishop Frank J. Caggiano – November 25, 2026

Every year around Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas, a seasonal grind can set in. You can almost see the to-do lists unfurling in the minds of people: events, gifts, who is hosting this year? For many, the season that is supposed to lift our spirits becomes a series of events to get through.

I get it. My November and December fill up quickly, too. Nonetheless, we need to rethink how we live our holidays. Too often we treat them as a break from real life, when they are meant to help us understand what our life is for. Even the word gives it away: holiday was originally holy day.

The German philosopher Josef Pieper saw this problem emerging in the late 1940s. In a book titled "Leisure: The Basis of Culture," he described a world of "total work," where people are measured by what they produce and rest is just a way to refuel for more producing. For Pieper, real leisure was an attitude of the soul, a willingness to stop grasping long enough to receive things as gifts.

Years later, in a different book named "In Tune with the World," Pieper asked a deceptively simple question. What makes a celebration a celebration? His answer was that we can only celebrate when we have something to say yes to. A holy day declares, in so many words, that it is good that the world exists and good to be alive in it. Take away that yes and you're left with only a day off and a lot of noise.

Pieper also noticed that every real holy day, when celebrated, is wasteful. We give up hours that could have been productive. We cook more food than anyone needs and stay at the table long after the plates are cleared. That overflow, that apparent excessiveness is part of the point. It's what separates a feast, a holy day from a coffee break.

So how can we take the holidays this year more seriously, make them more meaningful?

I'd suggest starting with gratitude. Thanksgiving is the one national holiday set aside simply for giving thanks, and it deserves to be protected from becoming a day of football and planning for Black Friday sales. Before the meal, try going around the table and asking each

person to name something they received this year that they didn’t earn. Some answers may bring laughter, and a few might bring tears.

Then rest. That can sound trite to a single mother working a double shift on Black Friday. Even an hour set apart, received as a gift rather than stolen from the schedule, is a beginning. Rest can seem like a luxury meant for other people. Yet the Sabbath, which Jews and Christians have kept for thousands of years, came to us as a commandment. God knows we would not get around to it on our own. I believe He also knows we need to be grateful and enjoy rest with others to have real meaning in life. A few hours with the phone in a drawer, enjoying family and friends over a good meal can do more for us than a whole weekend of errands or hours of scrolling on our phones or playing video games.

Spend time with people. Most of us will sit across from relatives we see once a year and catch maybe half of what they say. Ask your grandfather what Christmas was like when he was a boy and let the conversation wander. If a neighbor lost a husband or wife this year, call them. Maybe even make room for them at your table.

Finally, give, and not only things in boxes. St. John Paul II often taught that we only really find ourselves by making a sincere gift of ourselves to others. I have watched volunteers come out of a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving morning, feet aching, and they are almost always smiling. They have a deep inner joy.

For Christians, this goes to the very heart of Christmas. We believe God came close to us, as an infant, about as vulnerable as a human being can be. You don't have to share that faith to see something true in it. Most of us can remember a time we gave without counting the cost and walked away happier than when we started. This is the secret to finding joy in life: self-giving.

The holidays are coming. We can survive them, or we can let them remind us of something we forget the rest of the year: that our lives were given to us as a gift, and we are happiest when we give them away.

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