



# Surviving the Holidays

Every year most of us have a tendency to fantasize about the delights of the holidays, wanting this year to top all previous years. We *spend more, decorate more, bake more and eat more!* What a set up for disappointment!

Divorce makes the holidays even more difficult: other families are having so much fun and you are not. There's no money, the kids are at the other parent's house, and the sweetest holiday memories can bring the deepest sorrow and grief. These top ten tips for "Surviving the Holidays" can help you unload the dread, anxiety, or loneliness for a time of inner peace and hope. *That* is what the birth of Our Lord has always promised.

## **( 1 ) Have realistic expectations.**

This year WILL be different; don't try to make it the same as other years. That will only make you angry or depressed—and after divorce who needs more of *that*? Consider the medical analogy of divorce being like a heart attack; this visual can help you go through the season with much more realistic expectations. After a 'heart attack', one generally needs more rest, has to drop some former activities, and listens to the body for clues of *how far you can push yourself*. And as most patients will finally recover, you will, too. Christmas will come again next year.

## **( 2 ) Know you can stay home this year.**

The holidays can be exhausting even when you're happily married. This year you may feel like isolating and staying at home which is a normal part of grief and healing. But most people will feel uncomfortable if you choose not to join in holidays parties. They'll insist—maybe even push—to get you out. *Stop feeling sad! Come be happy with us!* They mean well, but they are also like the friend who wants you to unplug the heart monitor, get up out of your hospital bed, and come to the office party when you need to stay put. But be honest with yourself: if you are wallowing in self-pity, you may need to wash your face, spritz on some cologne, and force yourself go to the holiday celebration. You may be glad you did. But if you are genuinely overwhelmed and need the security of solace, give yourself permission to stay in. If you go to the party and are ambushed by extreme emotions, you also have the freedom to thank the host and leave early. YOU have to take care of you.

## **( 3 ) Do something special for yourself.**

The above being said, try to plan a time close to Christmas day where you go to a good movie, do a little window shopping, drop into Church for short adoration, or enjoy a special treat. It doesn't have to be lavish. It can be an old favorite activity you love or something new. If you have children you'll likely be out with them but do something special for yourself. Don't worry if you're disappointed afterward that maybe it wasn't worth it. You took a small step and that's what counts. If you'd rather stay home, then rent a favorite movie, cook a favorite meal, and

cozy up in a way that comforts you. There's no sin in that; it can actually be a small foretaste of heaven.

**( 4 ) Try to do something for someone else.**

One of the best ways to come out of our misery is to help someone else. For some, volunteering at a homeless shelter at Christmas is just the thing they need to bring them back to the reality that God is good, this year will be okay, and that there are many things for which to be thankful. But for others—and perhaps many more—remembering to get your kid's Christmas presents before Christmas Eve will literally be all that you can manage. That's okay.

**( 5 ) Keep it simple.**

It's common to eat, drink, sleep, party, shop, or spend too much to numb painful emotions—any time of the year! The holidays are an annual invitation to overindulge but that often only brings headache, hangovers, hefty bills, and more heartbreak. Having a Christmas tree may cheer you up, but for others it will be too depressing. Sending Christmas cards can be very therapeutic, but for others it is yet another time-consuming and unnecessary expense. Re-examine everything you used to do during the holidays and keep what works and get rid of the rest. Divorce can actually help you reorder your life in better ways you never realized.

**( 6 ) Keep in touch with the kids.**

Children crave routine and rituals which give them a sense of security—especially holiday customs. Divorce has already ripped away at the fabric of the family security blanket so try to keep as many of the holiday routines that they best love. Invite them to sit with you and talk about what will stay the same and what will change this year (dealing with change is a life-skill you *want* your children to have). Ask what their favorites are and help them focus on the fun. Instead of the expensive annual ski trip, popcorn and Christmas movies can become a new family tradition. Ignore when they roll their eyes, whine, or make demands. You're still the parent!

**( 7 ) Don't celebrate with your ex.**

Not unless it's been years, the kids are older, and you really do get along fairly well. It sounds good that you should all be able to get along at the holidays—but it's most often a myth. In most cases it confuses everyone, especially the kids. After divorce many children secretly (if not openly) hope Mom and Dad will get back together, a natural desire that God put into their hearts. When they see forced cooperation and old family connections it actually delays their acceptance of reality. False hopes are like sugar spikes, they end in worse depression after the holidays and are like salt to the wound of divorce. Many ex-spouses also secretly hope for reconciliation at the holidays as old memories kindle past affections. But most of the time this isn't real, either. The majority of couples who have not yet remarried and tried to reconcile at the holidays end up separating again within months. Christmas can't cover the real problems.

**( 8 ) Help the children buy a present for their other parent.**

Imagine how difficult it would be to try to get a present for your Mom or Dad without any help from the other parent. While divorce changes many things, there are other things that should

never change . . . like your encouraging the kids to freely see, love, honor, and respect their other parent. It can be a cathartic, selfless, and loving act for *you* to genuinely help your child pick, buy, or make something special for their Mom or Dad. It also shows the child that you don't hate the other parent when maybe they heard you say you do! But don't be tempted to take credit for this generosity by adding your name to the gift tag, or in future conversations: "Yes, I helped Zach pick that tie for you because I know how much you like green." Stay anonymous. The Lord sees what you do in secret.

**( 9 ) Draw close to Our Lord.**

This shouldn't be the last of the ten tips because it is the most important, but most people need to know they *can* manage these holidays before they can settle down emotionally and give thanks to God. And THANKS we should give! This holiday is about the answer to every man's prayers for salvation from all that wounds us: God come to us in the flesh. We "divorce" God every day in ways we don't even realize, and yet he takes us back every moment when we are open and contrite. He is "the good news" who came to us through Mary and greeted the shepherds in the stable. Adore him. Give him your sufferings as the kings gave gold. Let Mary's kind eyes fall upon you and Joseph's strong gaze give you hope. Think of him often during these days that follow the long wait of Advent. The long wait for Love.

**( 10 ) Go to Christmas Mass and rejoice in your heart.**

In "The Catholic's DIVORCE SURVIVAL Guide" DVD series, Dr. Ray Guarendi, Father Steve Porter, and Fr. Donald Calloway all remind us that we are emotional creatures. But after divorce our wounded emotions can be fickle and it's our thoughts that are meant to guide us. As Father Steve says about the wild emotions, "Go higher. Go to what you *know* to be true." On Christmas day your emotions may be extremely tender; the tears may come and the cries of your heart may be muffled by the strains of "Silent Night". But come. Come as you are. Know that you are loved. Know that there is hope. Know that as the child was born to embrace the cross, so, too, have you been called. But know that if you remain open to God that through the crosses of your divorce there *will* be resurrection and salvation. *That* is the hope we have in these holidays. O come . . . let us adore Him.

**God bless you.**