

A Jesuit guide to dealing with unvaccinated family members this holiday season



A year ago if you had asked people to name the hardest part of the pandemic, I suspect many would have said not being able to see family at the holidays. We did the best we could on Zoom, FaceTime and every other flat surface, but mostly we just looked forward to 2021, when we hoped we could actually be together once again.

Little did we know that the miraculous arrival of a Covid-19 vaccine that is safe, effective and free would lead to a whole new holiday obstacle, as some family members continue to refuse to get vaccinated.

If this issue doesn't affect you, consider yourself lucky: [30 percent of American adults are still not vaccinated](#). Meanwhile, children ages 5 to 11 are only now starting to be able to get the shot, and there is still no vaccine for children under 5.

For those in a situation where some family members are vaccinated and others are not, it may be a struggle to figure out what exactly to do about the holidays.

For those in a situation where some family members are vaccinated and others are not, it may be a struggle to figure out what exactly to do about the holidays. Do you allow only vaccinated people into your home? Refuse to wear a mask despite your unvaccinated status? Stay home, watch "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" and avoid the problem entirely?

Every decision seems likely to cause conflict in some way, which the holidays often have a healthy supply of anyway. So which is the right course of action for you?

Here's a simple five-step spiritual exercise drawn from the thinking of St. Ignatius to help you make your decision.

(Note: This exercise is meant for everyone trying to navigate the holidays, whether they are vaccinated or not. But that's not to say these are decisions of equal standing. Vaccination and masking are the only things protecting all of us from doing serious injury to both ourselves and others. They have been approved by medical professionals around the world and are backed by the pope, too. Please, if you are not yet vaccinated, consider what is holding you back and see if there isn't some way forward. Truly the greatest gift you could give those who love you this year is your own vaccination.)

Here's a simple five-step spiritual exercise drawn from the thinking of St.

Ignatius to help you make your decision.

1) Open Yourself to the Big Picture

Ignatian prayer often begins by stepping back from the specifics of the right now to take in the broader situation of our lives. Whether you're trying to figure out your own needs regarding the holidays or you're trying to deal with decisions others have made, we start by just giving ourselves a moment to breathe and catch up with ourselves, so to speak.

Where am I finding peace or joy in my life right now? What burdens am I carrying? We put these questions to God and see what God shows us.

2) Pray for Freedom and Acceptance

As we sink into the here and now, we might become more aware of our feelings. Maybe we feel some pressure to conform to what others in our family want. Maybe we are afraid of disappointing people. Maybe we are so furious with someone in our family we cannot even think straight.

It is important that we allow ourselves the chance to sit with and feel those things. We don't do ourselves or anyone else any favors by trying to bury them. As we've all seen at one holiday or another, eventually it is all going to come out.

As St. Ignatius liked to point out, our feelings are a gift. They're the way that God helps us to see what we want.

But also, as St. Ignatius liked to point out, our feelings are a gift. They're the way that God helps us to see what we want. They're like the airport worker waving flares, helping descending planes see where to go.

So whatever you might be feeling, give yourself the space to feel without

judgment. Anger, embarrassment, confusion, pride—it's all O.K. And if you feel trapped in some of those feelings, that's all right, too. Offer them up to the Lord, like we offer the simple bread and wine at Mass. Ask for God's help to transform them and us.

3) Imagine the Scenarios

St. Ignatius is known for imaginative prayer. Generally, that means imagining scenes from Scripture and maybe even placing yourself in the scene.

But we can also imagine the scripture that is our own life. If you are trying to figure out what you want to do with the holidays, or your own rules around safety, one idea might be to imagine yourself in each of your different scenarios: *I wear a mask. I stay away from others who are not vaccinated. I don't go.* Let each play out in your mind with no real agenda; it's just a movie you're watching with God. See what, if anything, stands out as you're watching—feelings, moments, relationships.

Imagine yourself in each of your different scenarios: *I wear a mask. I stay away from others who are not vaccinated. I don't go.*

Another method Ignatius suggests is to write a list of pros and cons for each scenario. That might sound overly secular, but here you are doing it in the context of prayer. Think of it like you're brainstorming with God.

After you've given either version of this exercise a little time, give yourself a minute to stretch or get a cup of tea, then sit and write a bit about what you noticed—how you felt in this scenario, how you feel now, anything that stood out. If you did the pros and cons, go back through the list for that scenario and circle any responses that stand out.

I find when I have to put things down on paper often I will have an insight that

I didn't have during the experience itself. I might even come to think about things completely differently than I did while it was going on. But if you're not much for journaling, you could also just sit quietly and ask God to show you what you need to pay attention to.

4) Reflect on the Movements of the Spirit

Ignatius insisted that just because something initially felt good did not mean it was right, nor did the fact that something felt wrong mean it was bad. When he was young, he loved to imagine himself being a knight, saving damsels in distress, but he noticed that when he had such daydreams, he felt empty afterward. When he imagined himself being a saint on the other hand, he felt much more at peace.

When you are done with your different scenarios and you consider the feelings that have gotten kicked up in them, where do you find yourself at peace? Where do you find yourself anxious, unsettled or confused? Does it perhaps suggest a choice? Or a direction to consider?

When your options may be either to go to Christmas and feel unsafe or to stay away and tick off your family, "great" is likely not an option.

Or if you've already made a choice and you've spent your prayer time just trying to be with your feelings, what movements have you experienced? Do you feel confirmed in any way in your decision? Again, this doesn't necessarily mean you feel great. When your options may be either to go to Christmas and feel unsafe or to stay away and tick off your family, "great" is likely not an option.

5) Accept Your Reality

So you've decided to skip Christmas this year. Or you're going to go for

Thanksgiving and see how it goes. Or you're going to ask certain things of everyone and, based on how they respond, you will go or stay home.

Great. You may have to figure out who you need to tell. Piece of advice: It doesn't have to be everybody, and it doesn't have to be a production, either. *This is what I'm doing, and this is why.* Because here's the thing: At this point, it's likely not about changing their minds. You might think it'd be great if your brother didn't want everyone to wear masks the whole time, or that Uncle Bert would shut up and get the vaccine. But you know what? That's just not who they are right now. And at some point we just have to accept that.

You've made a decision—Hello, Maskgiving! Or Vons grocery store's turkey for one! So as you prepare and then do that, ask God to help you receive the blessings of that choice.

Where we find that hard to do, we can ask God for help.

Ignatius likes to end prayer with a sense of gratitude. But I think this situation is more about being open to what is to come than looking back on the past. You've made a decision—Hello, Maskgiving! Or a turkey for one, please! So as you prepare and then follow through on your decision, ask God to help you receive the blessings of that choice.

If we all learned anything last year, it's that we can not only survive a myriad of unexpected and horrible situations but receive gifts there. A year ago we may not have expected to face a choice about holiday family parties. But we made a choice with God's help, and we trust there will be some kind of gift in it.

Be safe, and whatever your holidays may be, may they be blessed!