

Control holiday stress by emphasizing what matters

You haven't started your Christmas cards – the ones you didn't finish last year – the latest hot toy is sold out, and the kids want you to make the traditional cookies.

You just don't have the time, and none of it feels right anyway since you lost your mother this year.

Father Frank Donio, S.A.C., rector of the Pallottine Seminary and former director of the St. Jude Shrine, understands how easy it is to miss the real meaning of Christmas in the midst of stressful, sometimes painful, lives.

"We get caught up in things," he said. "We have family members over or we're going to family members or we're alone. There's someone around the table who's not there – and even if it's not recent, there's a greater poignancy at this time of year."

Add to that a consumer culture that emphasizes finding the right gift, and it's no wonder people wish they could just opt out of the holidays.

"The likelihood of anyone doing that is slim," Father Donio said with a laugh. "We're going to participate; the question is can we do it without getting stressed."

He focuses on four key concepts: seeking, experiencing, thanking and hoping.

"What are we seeking for this time of year?" he asked. "What do we want, where have we been, where do we want to go and where is God in that? Maybe there's been a change – a change in a relationship, an illness, maybe we're an empty nester – how do we see God's presence in that?"

When it comes to experiencing the holidays and the people we see, Father Donio asked, "Are we engaging them in a non-anxious way? Can we be for ourselves and others a non-anxious presence? How do we experience God in everyday moments of life?"

Stress occurs, he says, when we neglect everyday things and it builds up. We can

cope by continuing to seek God's presence in our lives.

Thanking is key, and not just before diving into the Thanksgiving turkey.

"How are we in thanksgiving to God for what we do have?" he said. "So often the holiday season puts so much on what that dinner could be - and it can never live up to the expectation. Turn that around - what am I thankful for?"

In his nine years as director of St. Jude Shrine in Baltimore, Father Donio saw people in all types of crisis, but no matter how bad things were, a person always had some aspect of life for which they could be thankful.

Seeking, experiencing and thanking lead to a more hopeful life.

Too often the focus is on how our lives could be better, and what we want, "but God isn't Santa Claus," Father Donio said. "But God is always gifting us in some form in our lives." He suggests turning to the Magi, the shepherds or Joseph. "He was reminded by God of being the steward of a great gift," Father Donio said.

People need to hope for not just what they can get but also what they can give. "Mary was a complete example of selflessness," he said.

He's given a number of talks on hope, and "the self-defeating piece, the thing I see often is people don't see how much God is actually present in their lives. We go through life with blinders on; we don't see where God is answering because we're not aware, we're not in that mode of seeking. We're in that mode of expecting. We end up passive, and our Catholic faith is active."