

This Christmas, embrace the chaos

“The Chaos Mass”

That was the description Father Mike Triplett gave to the 4 p.m. Christmas Eve Mass I signed up to lector at my home parish, Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex. It is with affection that Father Mike uses the phrase, as he looks forward to the spirit that fills the church on the afternoon before Christmas. Having once been a harried young parent in those pews, I know full well that the ambo will be one of the most serene locations in the church.


My father wasn't exactly Baron Von Trappe, but he and my mother ran a fairly tight ship, as evidenced by the home movies he took in front of the Christmas tree, showing five boys in matching red sweaters, shortest (me) to tallest. My wife Mary and I have been able to continue some family traditions, but order among the young ones was not one of them.



I can giggle with Kate and Don now, who are pictured circa 1990 after being caught making mud pies on Alta Avenue, but traveling with them back then was no laughing matter. On longer road trips, a wall of suitcases and food boxes and pillows separated their car seats in a Chevy station wagon, so that they could not view one another - let alone touch - and disrupt the driver. (One Christmas, they gifted me a dashboard “Revenger.” Instead of hurling epithets at other drivers, I would push the button for “machine gun” or “grenade launcher” and spare the kids another vocabulary lesson. Mercifully, in those moments of weakness I have progressed to touching a crucifix from Assisi, and voicing an abbreviated version of the Prayer of St. Francis.)

On Christmas Eve, as Mary would be baking and cooking up a storm, I would pull her out of the kitchen, load the family into the station wagon and head to St. Francis of Assisi in Mayfield for 4 p.m. Mass. In my memory, it was part Burning Man, part Ravens-Steelers showdown, all anticipation and edge, squirming kids ready for

Christmas presents and frustrated dads like me trying to corral them.

As they  got older, we wisely shifted to 8 p.m. Mass, all soothed by a string quartet, but there was still the potential for chaos underfoot. One Christmas Eve my grandsons were doing laps inside the rambling Victorian on Lake Avenue. Somebody knocked into the server decorated with a lovely crèche of ceramic figures, and Joseph went crashing to the floor. Shrugging it off, I had a bobble-head from Jerry D's Saloon and Restaurant stand in for the saint.

Last century's fatherly tantrum had become this one's grandfatherly gesture.

Merry Christmas.