



CHRIS GAFFNEY

## When the holidays just don't feel right

The day after Mom's funeral we celebrated my oldest brother's birthday with a family trip to the apple orchard. It was the first time Mom hadn't sung "Happy Birthday" to one of her kids on their birthday (except for the year she forgot Dan's birthday) and all of us felt her absence profoundly.

Posing for pictures in the orchard, enjoying fresh-baked treats, and watching my nephews climb the trees were welcome diversions from the inescapable truth that milestone moments would never feel the same.

Less than two months later came Thanksgiving, which was one of Mom's favorites, and the only holiday we celebrated with her extended side of the family.

My dinner that year was a meatball sub ordered from a gas station at a highway exit somewhere in Pennsylvania and eaten in the passenger seat of my girlfriend Jenny's car.

Halfway through the meal a single meatball plopped out of the sub streaking sauce down my chest and stomach before splattering onto the seat right between my legs leaving a stain on the seat that never came out.

We paused when that meatball splattered wondering whether to laugh or cry. Thankfully, we laughed.

The trip was our return to Connecticut after nearly three years in Texas. Thanksgiving fell between two early winter storms that year and served as our best chance to pass through the mountains between her sister's house in Louisville, Kentucky, and our new home in Norwalk.

We didn't know what to do when Christmas came a month later so we improvised going to Christmas Eve services in the church I grew up with, sleeping in a charming local hotel, then having an early Christmas dinner with my dad and stepmom before flying to Nashville (where Jenny's family lives).

In Nashville, Jenny surprised me with a room at the Opryland Hotel, which goes all out for Christmas. We spent the night walking among the shops and lights, then closed down the Jack Daniels bar.

If you asked me before Mom died to guess what that first Thanksgiving would look like, I never would've gone with gas station meatballs eaten in the pas-

senger seat of an idling car. And if you'd asked me to guess what Christmas would look like, I definitely wouldn't have said dinner and drinks at a high-end Nashville tourist trap.

I also wouldn't have guessed that both of those holidays would end up standing out in my memories as some of my all-time favorites. Turns out, some of the best holiday celebrations are the ones that don't feel traditional at all.

It took a long time for holidays to start to feel like holidays again but they definitely were — I've got the memories to prove it.

Every year Jenny proposes putting the Christmas tree up before Thanksgiving and every year I immediately dismiss it as absurd. "A Christmas tree," I've always said, "should go up no sooner than the day after Thanksgiving."

Well, our Christmas tree is already up and we had our Thanksgiving dinner early too on the Sunday before "Thanksgiving."

We squeezed it in as the grand finale to my mother-in-law's two-week-long (COVID test-approved) visit. After years of playfully bickering over these "ironclad traditions," we both intuitively recognized that freeing ourselves from traditional constraints was necessary this year.

Anecdotal observations and news reports suggest a lot of people feel that way.

The trick to celebrating a holiday that no longer feels like a holiday is to actually celebrate it. Finding something special in the difficult holidays rejuvenates their meaning.

It's fine to reminisce about past celebrations and natural to speculate on what you'd be doing at that time in said alternate universe (right now Mom and her sister would be staging their whipped cream fight. Remember how she got when it smudged her glasses?) but you've got to push forward with whatever you've got.

Even when what you've got is just a gas station meatball splattered between your legs. Though it may not seem like it at the time, believe me, it's reason enough to celebrate.

However you choose to celebrate this year, Happy Thanksgiving!

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GOV. NED LAMONT

## 'Plenty to be grateful for'

By Gov. Ned Lamont

This year, our family's table will have fewer people gathered around it than we're used to. It's tempting to see that as another sign of the times, but I choose to see it as a reminder of the inspiring efforts made by the everyday people of Connecticut to make this meal possible for us all. Words cannot express how grateful I am to live in a state where its residents look after one another, respect one another, and offer help when someone is in need. For that I thank you.

At this time of year it's traditional to take time to reflect on what's most important in our lives and express gratitude. Like so many things during this past year, it's hard to find comfort in this familiar custom when there are reminders of the strangeness of the times all around us.

There's no way to put on a cheerful face and pretend that everything is whole when we've lost so much. The virus has cost the lives of over 250,000 Americans, the jobs and livelihoods of countless more, and robbed us all of our everyday reality.

And yet there's hope and plenty to be grateful for.

The adversity of this moment has reminded us how inspiring and courageous our fellow citizens are who have made sacrifices

Thankful for readers

In recent days, we invited readers to share reflections on what they are grateful for in this season of Thanksgiving. They served up responses involving family, America, supermarket and health workers and enjoying a turkey sandwich on the beach.

We'll publish their responses in Friday's edition.

on our behalf. Connecticut's doctors, nurses, and other public health workers have worked tirelessly through unthinkable long hours while putting their own safety at risk. Medical professionals have come out of retirement to provide assistance to hospitals and nursing homes, where the help is sorely needed. Our state has seen an outpouring of support from nonprofit partners who've stepped up to the plate to provide aid and services to those suffering. Connecticut's teachers, some of the best in the country, have risen to the challenge of educating our children — a challenge in the best of times, as many of us found out first hand — while adapting to a remote environment.

All that is to say nothing of the ordinary Connecticut folks who have volunteered their time. People have come forward from all

corners to man testing sites, deliver food to those in quarantine, and facilitate voting to ensure our democracy continues to thrive. Many have cared for their neighbors who are most at risk by delivering supplies to spare them from danger.

We have a lot to be thankful for. At this moment, we also have hope in the form of a number of promising vaccines on the horizon. With this hope, despite the fatigue we all feel at having been deprived of even the most basic human interaction, it's more important than ever that we honor the efforts and sacrifice of our fellow Connecticut residents by staying vigilant. It's not easy, but the more we express our collective thanks by keeping each other safe when there are treatments so close at hand, the sooner we can get back to the life that we so dearly miss.

In the meantime, despite the impact COVID has had on volunteerism, there are still countless ways to step up and give back throughout this holiday season and beyond. Connecticut charities need your help more than ever — so consider donating time safely or supporting them however you can. We're still one big family and in this together.

From my family to yours, I wish each of you a warm and happy Thanksgiving.

BISHOP FRANK J. CAGGIANO

## Offering thanks during a pandemic

Thanksgiving Day was always my father's favorite holiday. He loved it for many reasons, not the least of which was for the incredible meal my mother used to cook. I remember those days fondly; we began with a big breakfast, watched the same movie later that morning, and then we would sit at the table for hours. I delighted in that time with my family, in the traditions, and of course, in the food.

I'm sure many of us share very happy memories of Thanksgiving, which makes this year of the pandemic so much more troubling, knowing that we cannot safely gather in large numbers — even in our own homes with those who are dearest to us. In a year of much loss and anxiety, this is yet another heavy burden.

It may seem inappropriate to speak of giving thanks during a pandemic when so many have died, and so many others have become ill. However, I believe that only with a deep and abiding sense of gratitude in our hearts we can hope for better days and persevere before any challenge.

Perhaps we should let this most difficult year be an occasion to reflect on the full meaning of Thanksgiving in our lives. In my view, Thanksgiving is a holiday that draws upon deep Judeo-Christian religious roots. As Christians, ours is a faith of thanksgiving for the many gifts and blessings that God has given us. Everything we have, we owe to God's love and providence. For Christians, a spirit of thanksgiving should be the foundation of every day of our lives.

In fact, the Eucharist, which we receive

during the celebration of Holy Mass and we believe to be the source and summit of our Catholic faith, is derived from the Greek word, *eucharistia*, which means "thanksgiving." This means that every time we attend Mass, we are invited to thank God the Father, through Jesus His son, for the gifts in our life, and the priceless gift of eternal life to come.

On a personal level the pandemic has disrupted our lives and caused us to feel anxiety. Yet we must not lose sight of the growing number of those who have felt the economic consequences of job loss that has led to growing homelessness, hunger, and even despair. As we experience this unexpected vulnerability, let us pray that it deepens our bonds with our sisters and brothers across the globe who have long faced daily uncertainty, including chronic unemployment, food instability and a lack of medical care.

It has also been a year in which many Catholics remain afraid or unable to attend Sunday Mass, and those who do attend abide by significant restrictions designed to keep all safe. These precautions are necessary, but they are not easy, and I am very grateful to see such universal cooperation with the protocols that we have put in place to safeguard life.

We are also encouraged by the response of so many who have come forward to help those in need. In our diocese Catholic Charities has performed extraordinary works of service, parish volunteers have reached out to those who are most vulnerable, and our dedicated teachers and

staff have kept diocesan schools open to safeguard our children. Likewise, every day, we witness the courageous and inspiring response of other faith traditions and all people of good will to help those in need.

As people of faith we believe God has remained present to us since the pandemic began. How can we look upon the faces of our brothers and sisters on the front lines of health care who each day run into the breach and not be overwhelmed with gratitude for their goodness and their courage? How can we look upon those who comfort the sick and their families and do everything possible to save lives without profound thankfulness for their very witness? How can we not see the face of God in them and all those who have acted with courage and compassion?

We must not forget that even in our moments of profound suffering and grief, the love of God, made manifest in the Eucharist and in the love of our brothers and sisters, will triumph over every challenge. We know that God does not desire for us to suffer. However, when we do, he is present with us, holding us in the palm of his hands and promising us that he will never let go. Knowing that God will always keep his promises, even in the face of all that I have just described, I remain overwhelmed with a deep sense of deep gratitude that God will bring us renewal and new life.

My friends, I know that there are many challenges ahead during the coming weeks. Yet I invite you to join me in pausing today not only to look forward in patient hope



Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media  
**Bishop Caggiano and Rev. Reginald D. Norman lead the ceremony during the dedication of the Philip Tai-Lauria memorial garden at Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Wilton in August.**

for the vaccines that will save millions of lives, but to remember that our God has not and never will abandon us.

As we sit down with loved ones this Thanksgiving — or perhaps gather together virtually — let us find reasons for gratitude, for therein lies our hope. Let us also pray for our own families and for those struggling with the hardship of separation this year, and most of all for those who are afflicted with COVID-19, and for the many in our midst who have suffered the loss of loved ones.

In this spirit of remembrance and gratitude, I wish you and your family a very healthy, blessed, and happy Thanksgiving.

*The Most Rev. Frank J. Caggiano was named bishop of Bridgeport by Pope Francis in 2013. You can read his reflections on Facebook: Bishop Frank J. Caggiano or follow him on Twitter @BishopCaggiano, or Instagram @BishopFrankCaggiano.*