

Jesus Won't Socially Distance on His Birthday: Nativity Displays on the Rise

Christmas 2020 may look different in some ways thanks to COVID-19 restrictions, but the pandemic is not slowing the demand for nativity scenes at state capitols. The American Nativity Scene and attorneys at the Thomas More Society are helping groups of private citizens across the nation to display biblical manger scenes on government property this Christmas.

Ed O'Malley, president of the American Nativity Scene, said, "This will be a banner year for nativity scenes, with 32 manger displays scheduled to be erected at state capitols this holiday season, up from 27 in 2019."

"This has been a hard year for many people, making the message of hope delivered by the baby Jesus more important than ever," he added. "The growth momentum we experienced in 2019 has continued, and COVID-19 is not slowing it down, making Christmas 2020 a banner year for nativity scenes on government property."

"We realize that some state venues may require visitors to wear masks and socially distance, but the holy family will be present in the traditional arrangement featuring the Christ child, Mary, Joseph and the angel. The coronavirus cannot curb the importance of keeping Christ in Christmas. We will celebrate the birthday of baby Jesus despite COVID-19."

Christmas 2020 comes on the heels of a multitude of legal challenges made in the defense of religious freedom. As governors from California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York and other states slapped discriminatory COVID related restrictions on churches—often leaving businesses like

tattoo parlors and liquor stores to operate unimpeded—the Thomas More Society intervened to fight for the Constitutional rights of pastors and their congregations.

Thomas More Society Executive Vice President and General Counsel Andrew Bath expects battles over religious rights to continue.

“A pandemic is of great concern, but throughout this season of COVID-19, multiple federal and state judges have reminded us that even emergencies do not override the United States Constitution nor the constitutions of each state,” Bath said. “We have been following CDC guidelines to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 for eight months now, but even during states of emergency, the Constitution remains the law of the land. Thomas More Society attorneys will continue upholding the rights of individuals and congregations to worship freely and we pray that the nativity scenes of this Christmas season will help to foster a sense of unity and peace on earth.”

O'Malley said new manger displays are planned at state capitols in Idaho, Oklahoma, Nevada and West Virginia. It is expected that all of the previously participating state capitols will continue to feature a nativity scene, including Little Rock, Arkansas, which has featured a crèche at the capitol since the 1940s.

Tom Brejcha, Thomas More Society president and chief counsel, echoed the importance of displaying the nativity scenes, especially in a year such as 2020.

“The Christmas message bears secular as well as religious significance, as it highlights the hope and miracle of birth and new life, the inherent dignity of each and every human being,” Brejcha said.

Pro bono work by the attorneys at the Thomas More Society ensures that citizens who privately fund religious displays on public property are accorded their right to do so as

guaranteed by the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the United States Constitution. A permanent federal injunction banning discrimination against religious speech assures that the Christmas crèches are protected from erroneous applications of the widely misunderstood concept of “separation of church and state.”

The following state capitols featured a nativity scene in 2019: Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin. Additionally, Christmas 2020, will feature manger displays in Idaho, Oklahoma, Nevada and West Virginia, with newly participating states still being added. {eo}

Thomas More Society is a national not-for-profit law firm dedicated to restoring respect in law for life, family and religious liberty.