

# Call to Renewal

Spiritual sustenance from sisters  
around the world

An Advent and Christmas gift from:



**GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT**

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# Seasons greetings from Global Sisters Report

*War, natural disasters, the lingering effects of the pandemic. We enter this Advent season in 2022 with a litany of laments. It can be challenging to summon the spiritual energy, the call to renewal, the wellspring of hope that are the hallmarks of this special time of year.*

*Yet we must. We cannot allow this period of waiting and preparation to pass unmarked and only casually observed. To truly welcome Emmanuel – “God With Us” – requires some effort and reflection on our part. That is one reason why we at Global Sisters Report in recent years have issued e-books to accompany our readers during Advent, to thank you for your loyalty and provide an extra resource for spiritual nourishment.*

*These columns, selected from our bountiful and beautiful writings of sisters and associates last season, have wisdom to offer us this Advent season. Listen to Sr. Nancy Sylvester as she gives us a new “Advent calendar for today” with guidance on how to make each week more meaningful and enriching. Advent, she writes, “prepares us not only for celebrating the birth of Jesus but also for what that set in motion in all of us as we continue the mystery of the incarnation “coming into being” until the end of time.”*

*This year, we included a few more columns about Christmas with a sampling of columns of how Christ’s coming – His Arrival – is celebrated in various locales around the world, with particular customs and traditions that underscore the joy of the culmination of Advent.*

*It is often voiced that this special time of the liturgical year – the new year – too often can be overshadowed by the busy-ness of preparing for Christmas. For some of us – perhaps many of us – this may be the first year since the COVID-19 pandemic began that we can gather with a large group of loved ones to celebrate Christmas. While we savor the anticipation of that special blessing, let us also take the “soul time” we need. We hope that this collection of columns will provide some additional spiritual sustenance in this special season.*

*Blessings to you and all those you hold dear this Advent, Christmas and New Year!*

**Gail DeGeorge**  
Editor

*On behalf of all of us at Global Sisters Report*



# An Advent calendar for today

BY NANCY SYLVESTER | NOV. 30, 2021



(Unsplash/Elena Mozhvilo)

Advent continues to be one of my favorite liturgical seasons. When I was growing up, I loved receiving an Advent calendar. Every day you opened a window or door and found a Scripture quote or a prayer for you to say or reflect upon. Wondering if they still existed, I Googled it and discovered they were still being made. However, the first ones shown contained pieces of chocolate behind the days! As delicious as that sounds it just didn't seem the way to enter Advent.

Advent is about anticipation and preparation. The word comes from the Latin *adventus*, "coming," which within the Christian tradition refers to the coming of Jesus celebrated at Christmas as well as anticipating the second coming at the end of time.

A secondary meaning, however, caught my attention. It is "coming into being." That phrase connotes movement, emergence, unfolding. It is not static nor a past event. It is ongoing, happening now and into the future.

Advent then prepares us not only for celebrating the birth of Jesus but also for what that set in motion in all of us as we continue the mystery of the incarnation "coming into being" until the end of time.

Today theologians reflecting on the Incarnation through the lens of evolution offer an insight into what this might mean. God's presence among us began with the first flaring forth some 13.8 billion years ago. Everything from this beginning to the end of time is a revelation of the mystery of God.

I think Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr captures this well when he writes: "Creation itself is the timeless Incarnation which we call Christ, and Jesus is the personal Incarnation born in a moment of time when we could begin to understand and love a person."

That personal incarnation in Jesus invites all of us in be in relationship with the Divine Mystery and to be transformed in love. In the mystical body of Christ, we have been evolving, learning throughout time how to be more like Jesus. We are "coming into being" as sons and daughters of God.

Advent is the time to take time to prepare to celebrate an event and recommit to a process.

Perhaps taking time is the most important part of Advent. I'm thinking that the Advent calendar is a way to do that — to slow down and focus one's reflection every day.

Each day is an invitation to stop and to enter one's heart space even in the midst of all that is happening in our world and in our lives.

I started wondering how I would create an Advent calendar today?

The first part of the month, we'd prepare for the event.

*The first week*, I would use the first chapters of the Gospels of Mathew and Luke which include the nativity narratives. I'd invite a slow reading of those chapters being aware of what strikes you, what stays with you. It might be the genealogy, the use of dreams, the escape from Herod, the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth, the birthplace, the birth, or the variety of people who visited the newborn child. How does that influence your understanding of the Incarnation?

*The second week*, we might get in touch with that historical moment — the event.

The shepherds, the wise ones, didn't have a crystal ball but they "knew" something was happening of a different magnitude. It was a recognition event in which knowing comes through one's whole being.

I would invite you through pictures and questions to imagine who you might have been in first century Palestine given your current economic status, marital status, gender, race, religion and health conditions: Would you be a Roman, a Samaritan, a Pharisee or a scribe? Would you be Jewish or a Gentile? A woman or a man? Would you make your living fishing, sewing or trading in the temple? Would you be an outcast, a leper, a prostitute?

At the end of the week, I'd ask if you lived at that time do you think you would "recognize" this very human birth as the Incarnation of God's love? What would you resist? What would help you to "see"?

The transition to the third week would be the invitation to take some time to sit in contemplative silence. Open yourself to God working within you and simply see what arises in you as you prepare for the Christmas event.

The second part of the month we'd prepare for the process of Incarnation, of "coming into being."

This is a bit more difficult. For it is a lifelong journey. I believe the Incarnation invites us to see the potential that is ours to put on the mind of Christ. Through contemplative prayer we awaken to our true self, our authentic self. Over time we become liberating, healing, inclusive love to all whom we encounter.

This process continues in our historical time and it offers hope at this time of disruption, chaos and increasing divisions. It offers hope because the Incarnation continues coming into being — that promise is inherent in the Incarnation event. However, we are essential to its unfolding.

*The third week* would have pictures of significant events in our world. This is because putting on the mind of Christ

invites us to take a long, loving look at our reality.

These might include pictures of: COVID-19, the climate crisis, refugees, war-torn areas, trafficking and prostitution, people living in poverty, political divisions and their hate-filled rhetoric and ads, effects of systemic racism and white supremacy, discrimination of the LGBTQIA community, and oppression of women and girls.

The invitation is to let these pictures enter your heart and speak to you. To awaken the energy needed to respond in love to all that is happening in our world and in our lives.

*The fourth week* invites us to understand that the ongoing unfolding of the Incarnation as "coming into being" is about being transformed in love, and embodying it. We'd imagine putting on the mind of Christ and moving together as a people and as an Earth community toward greater wholeness.

Reflect on how you live out or desire to live out the values Jesus taught. Let each day depict your expression of some of the qualities of mercy, compassion, equality, forgiveness, peace, justice, respect, dignity, sacredness of person and creation, the common good and love.

As we *near the end of Advent*, your contemplative practice continues, as you surrender to the action of God, divine mystery, incarnate throughout time and space and within you, for your own transformation and for that of the world.

*When Christmas arrives*, your gift is ready. As you became more aware of who you are as Incarnation "coming into being" you will radiate that outward. You will act and be in new ways and it will nourish those around you and beyond.

One of the profound gifts of Incarnation is that we are all children of God and invited to share in the divine consciousness. Our planet needs us to accept that gift and live it.

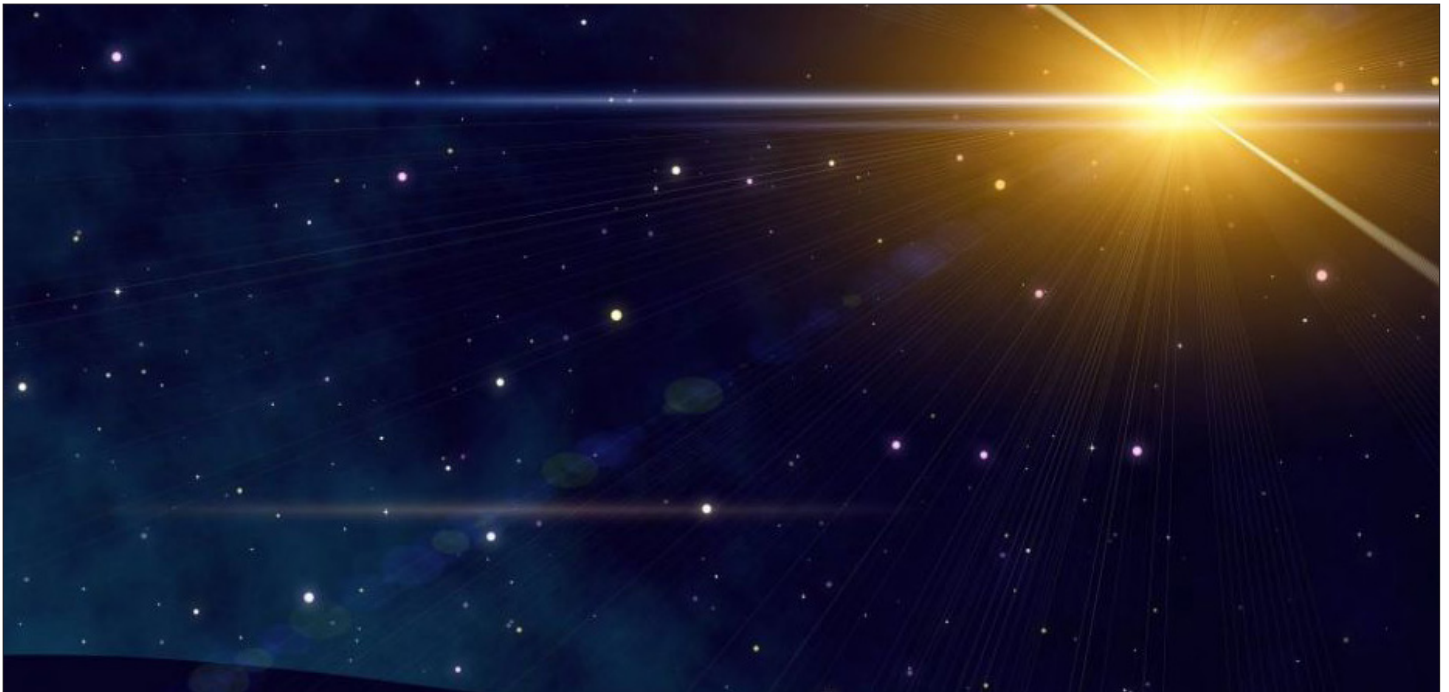
This Advent let us deepen our realization of this gift. Let it come into being within us and shine forth. Let us become a light for our world!

P.S. And now enjoy that chocolate!

*[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that she was National Coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. ICCD is beginning its third decade with new resources and programs. For information go to [www.iccdinstitute.org](http://www.iccdinstitute.org).]*

# Advent's expectant waiting includes a call to faithful action

BY AMANDA CARRIER | DEC. 14, 2021



(Pixabay/Gerd Altmann)

Expectant waiting. These two words often describe Advent. This is our season of waiting and preparing for the birth of Christ. Our Advent calendars patiently count down the days, waiting for the big moment. We light purple and pink candles to mark each week and reflect on the peace, hope, love and joy of the season.

But what if the invitation of this season is to do more than wait? What if these four weeks leading up to Christmas are a call to action? Our Advent journey toward Christmas is a time when we come face to face with the Divine invitation of Jesus' incarnation. Every year, the celebration of Christ's birth calls us to actively discern how we can respond to the outpouring of God's love.

In the two Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, we see people launched into action. Mary and Joseph must travel for the census, the shepherds went with haste, and the magi followed a star across the desert. Everyone is on the move — wondering, hoping and seeking

in response to a divine invitation. But what is God inviting them to? Leading up to the first Christmas, everyone who encountered God's message had more questions than answers. Those questions needed to be pondered and discerned.

Discernment is not simply guessing what God secretly wants us to do. It is the prayerful conversation that allows us to co-create with God as our lives unfold before us. Mary, Joseph and the shepherds had personal messages from God with concrete invitations and instructions: "Take Mary as your wife." "Name him Jesus." "You will find a child."

Even so, they all asked follow-up questions. Mary wondered how she could possibly be with child before saying "yes" to God's wonderful invitation. Joseph was asked in a dream to face his fears before he could accept his role as Jesus' foster father. The shepherds didn't know what to make of the angelic choir rejoicing at Jesus' birth; they had to go and see for themselves in or-



der to understand God's gift. Discernment, even when God's call gives us a clear idea of what we are looking for, requires us to actively explore and search for meaning.

Unfortunately, discernment isn't so straightforward for most of us. For many, it may be easier to relate to the experience of the magi who did not receive such clear directions. It is probable that the magi were astrologers just doing their jobs, watching the skies for signs and messages, when they were surprised by a new star. A celestial message arriving without instructions.

According to their tradition, a new star would signify the birth of a new ruler, but what would the birth of a foreign ruler mean for the magi? The star was an unlooked-for invitation calling the magi into the unknown. Just as Mary, Joseph and the shepherds acted in response to God's unexpected call, the magi set out on their unique journey to discover what God's invitation might mean for them.

Discernment is important when we face a decision, but it is equally important when God surprises us with new possibilities. And God will surprise us — often! When we aren't looking for new opportunities, when we aren't at a crossroads, God will still whisper to "the ear of our heart," asking us to journey with God — wherever that may lead. There is no right or wrong answer here, it is purely the choice to let God into our lives as a partner and guide.

However, this is not a choice made once and for all. The choice to welcome God into our lives, into all that we are, is a daily active opening that requires us to keep putting one foot in front of the other, moving with God even when we do not know where we are going.

That is the action we are called to in the spirit of Advent: not just expectant waiting on God to act, but the intentional desire to let God be with us in all the ups and downs of life. The season of Advent is an opportunity to realize that God doesn't want to be part of our plans only when we face a difficult choice or when we need a miracle. God wants to be with us in everything, always.

The culmination of Advent celebrates the day God so loved the world that God came to dwell with us. We prepare to celebrate the moment when we will usher in the Christmas season at midnight, when we will welcome God With Us, by actively opening ourselves to God who is always with us. We are not just waiting; we are practicing with every choice and every step along the way. It is easy to forget God's invitation is to actively participate with God while we journey through the sacred night of Advent toward Christmas morning. Practice searching your personal night sky for a new star. Stay active. Stay awake. And stay open.

*[Amanda Carrier is a Sister of Mercy of the Americas and blogger who shares her experiences in ministry and as a sister on her blog Journeygalrsm. She works on social justice concerns, including the degradation of the earth, at Mercy International Association Global Action at the United Nations. Before that, she contributed an essay on compassion to the book In Our Own Words: Religious Life in a Changing World. Amanda enjoys cooking for her community, especially baking homemade bread.]*

Read online at [GlobalSistersReport.org/node/202966](https://GlobalSistersReport.org/node/202966).

# You don't need a television Christmas to celebrate Christ's birthday

BY TERRI LAURETA | DEC. 20, 2021



(Flickr/Coastal Elite)

As a child, did you define a “real” Christmas by what you saw on television? “The Donna Reed Show”? “Leave It to Beaver”? “The Three Stooges”? I did. But I lived in Hawaii, and no television Christmas happened there.

The topside of Molokai, an island in the Hawaiian chain, is where I grew up. My father worked for Del Monte’s pineapple industry. Many people think of Hawaii as a “melting pot.” Let me share my reality of the melting pot. I lived in a plantation village where people of different races and cultures lived on the same plantation. Like other areas in the world where immigration took place, the different groups felt the need to maintain their safety and identity. Therefore, many groups excluded anyone who was not like them. This racial prejudice formed separate residential pockets. It was rare to see Filipinos in the Japanese section of the village.

Because most Filipinos were the least educated, they were hired as lowly pineapple pickers. The Filipinos, in their innocence, had accepted Del Monte’s contract requirement that wives and children were to be

left behind. The ensuing depression caused by loneliness in the Filipino sector was prevalent. The feelings of desolation were reflected in the dirty, smelly living conditions of most Filipinos. One of the standing jokes endured by many of the illiterate Filipinos was the humiliating label “stupid.” It was the drive of my parents that proved the label untrue. Members of the Laureta family were respected as intelligent and educated people.

But the situation of the Filipinos highlighted reality: Who could afford a television Christmas? Who would even want a television Christmas? The frustration became even greater because Filipinos had little money to fly to the city of Honolulu on Oahu, where there was a greater chance of experiencing a television Christmas.

Those who could afford Christmas trees waited for their order from the continental United States. The trees were expensive, and they took a long time to reach Hawaii. By the time they arrived, they were dry and brittle. Most of the needles had fallen off.

I wanted snow. According to Charlie Brown, snow was perfect white balls. I really wanted snow. The weather forecaster mentioned only rain. My creativity solved the

problem. I sneaked into the bathroom and opened the bathroom cabinet where my father's shaving supplies were stored. There it was! His can of shaving cream!

Rushing to the tree, I sprayed gobs of shaving cream onto the sparsely needled branches. How absolutely pretty the snowy tree looked! No one told me that the gobs of shaving cream would disappear within 15 minutes. When the shaving cream did collapse into nothingness, I was inconsolable. What was happening to my television Christmas?

There was an annual plantation community Christmas party for all workers and their families. It was held in the one movie theater on the plantation. The party consisted of entertainment by the children, and Christmas songs and carols. A visit from Santa was often met with crying and screaming little children who had never seen a big, bearded, white man before. I was one of the children terrified of Santa.

When I was 5 years old, I was forced to take hula lessons. Taking hula lessons is like mainlanders taking tap dancing or ballet. By the time the annual Christmas program arrived, my level of anxiety was beyond measure.

The hula teacher had instructed each mother to obtain a flower to be worn in the little dancer's hair. My ambitious mother picked a large wild hibiscus flower off the hedge. Because my hair was so straight, it took 12 bobby pins to keep the flower in my hair.

The night of doom arrived. We stood on stage. The curtains were drawn. The song, "The Santa Claus Hula," started playing. We began dancing. Within two minutes, ants appeared, coming out of my hibiscus flower. As if that wasn't bad enough, the ants started crawling onto my hair and face. I screamed. Shaking and twisting, I tried to pull the flower out. No success because 12 bobby pins held the flower in my hair very well. The situation worsened. The audience started laughing.

I chose to end my career dancing the hula.

Not wanting to prevent me from participating in the performing arts, my parents had me take Filipino

dancing lessons. That Christmas, I had the opportunity to dance with an obnoxious boy. According to the choreography of this particular dance, each boy was to kneel among six girls, who were to dance around him and, at the right time, each girl would tap his uplifted coconut shell. I knocked him on his bare head with my coconut shell. Sometimes it's hard to be a Christian at Christmas.

My mother was very creative. She was determined to make our Christmases memorable. She constructed a cardboard fireplace, complete with red "bricks." It was three dimensional and the size of a real fireplace. Instead of a real fire, there were simulated flames made from gold and red foil. Electrically run, a circular piece of shiny metal rotated near the "fire" to give the impression of glowing flames. I loved this wintry Christmas effect. I still do, and I admire any house with a fireplace. To me, it reflects calmness, warmth and a loving family. Sounds like a fairytale dream, doesn't it?

That's all I want. It makes me very happy that Jesus has a birthday, and it doesn't have to be a television Christmas.

*[Terri Laureta traveled from topside Molokai in Hawaii to enter the Sisters of Saint Francis in Syracuse, New York (the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Neumann Communities). With an academic background in music with a concentration in church music and liturgy, she ministered in several Catholic churches as music director. She currently serves as music director at her residence, the Franciscan Villa in Syracuse. She is also a professional artist.]*



# Happy Christmas down under! Orana to Christmas Day!

BY TRACEY EDSTEIN | DEC. 27, 2021



A gum tree in Australia; its “Christmassy” flowers — made of the male stamens — look like fireworks. (Tracey Edstein)

The event commemorated all over the world on Dec. 25 occurred in the Northern Hemisphere — and since then, images that are universally recognized as representing the birth of Mary and Joseph’s son, Jesus, have a wintry air.

In many parts of the world, especially those countries with a Western tradition, this makes perfect sense and is rarely, if ever, questioned. However, for those celebrating Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere, images of snowmen, holly and ivy, red-suited gentlemen (Santa’s helpers) and mulled wine don’t quite cut it. Of course, these images have no real connection to the time-hallowed Christmas story but they have become ubiquitous.

As an Australian who loathes the intense heat of summer (yes, we do exist!) I find these images appealing — alluring even! However, celebrating Christmas down under is different, and so for those to whom a hot Christmas is a foreign concept, here’s a sun-tinged window into the reality.

In Australia, Christmas Day and Dec. 26 (St Stephen’s Day or Boxing Day) are public holidays. When Christmas falls on a Thursday through to Monday, it becomes a four-day weekend! Significantly, schools in Australia close for five weeks beginning a few days before Christmas and many members of the community take up to a month’s annual leave, so from Christmas Eve onwards, a festive feel prevails.

For those who observe Christmas as a religious feast, and

for those who simply anticipate a well-earned break, the temperature makes a difference!

Caroling choirs lead community celebrations in parks and gardens without scarves and gloves. In fact, they may need Akubra hats and fans!

The practice of decorating homes and public spaces with elaborate lights and festive scenes is just as popular as in the Northern Hemisphere, but those who make the pilgrimage to see them need to wait not only for darkness but for the temperature to drop.

Many parishes celebrate the Vigil Mass of Christmas outdoors, to allow for increased crowds and perhaps catch any prevailing breezes. Casual wear is de rigueur and often the mood is relaxed, yet respectful. A former parish priest in my parish would follow the Vigil Mass with a brief report on Santa’s progress, reminding children that heading to bed early was highly recommended!

This approach is very family-friendly and makes it easy for younger generations who might not participate regularly to feel comfortable and included.

My family’s tradition includes a post-Christmas Eve Mass supper which fortifies us for the big day to come. With daylight saving added to the mix, you need to stay up late to see a star in any direction!

For many years my daily routine has included an early



A tree full of white cockatoos in Australia (Tracey Edstein)

morning walk. On Christmas Day (and on other significant days) I like to walk to the local cemetery to visit my father's grave. I need a hat, sunglasses and insect repellent, and I hope that the plovers and magpies are not in the mood for swooping!

Some maintain the traditions of northern climes with egg-nog, baked ham, turkey, plum pudding and mince pies; others create their own traditions including seafood, salad, pavlova (a light and airy Australian dessert) and lots of chilled drinks. A popular seasonal song is Nick Minchin's "White Wine in the Sun." In many families, grace is prayed and those around the table may acknowledge a blessing of the year about to end or express in prayer a hope for the year about to begin.

There are Australian carols — but to be honest, they've never really caught on. "The Carol of the Birds" proclaims:

*Out on the plains the brolgas are dancing  
Lifting their feet like war horses prancing  
Up to the sun the woodlarks go winging  
Faint in the dawn light echoes their singing  
Orana! Orana! Orana to Christmas Day!*

*Orana* means "welcome" and this carol was written by William Garnet James and John Wheeler. It reminds me that the white cockatoos often seen in summer months perch in evergreen trees like living decorations. However, these lovely local images have failed to supplant herald angels singing, shepherds watching their flocks by night, and the manger that

was pressed into service because there was no crib for a bed.

Incidentally, the shepherd dimension of the Nativity story really doesn't cut it down under. We have more sheep than people — in fact three sheep per person — and so the biblical image of the shepherd knowing his sheep by name is way more pastoral (pardon the pun) than Australian graziers can manage. Nevertheless, a Nativity scene that features sheep feels right. After all, the baby is the Lamb of God. And incidentally, Nativity plays in Australia often feature shepherds wearing striped beach towels with one end rolled carefully around a small head. We have no shortage of beach towels!

Last Christmas I spent a lot of time looking for a Nativity set for a friend who was preparing to enjoy her first Christmas in her new home. I was happy with the slightly South American-flavored one I purchased but also on offer were versions closer to home — well, kind of. One featured a full cast of kangaroos — Jesus as a joey in Mary's pouch — and there was a similar koala version. Truly. There is a lot to be said for upholding the tradition.

Last Christmas I also spent time looking for an Australian Christmas card for English friends. It seemed only fair, given that spending a recent Christmas in London, I had delighted in the gloriously Northern Hemisphere cards with cassocked choirboys and churches with snowy steeples. However, it was difficult to get beyond bland beaches or Santa on a surfboard. My friends would not describe themselves as religious so I settled for a hilarious Christmas jumper (sweater) cartoon. We don't have Christmas jumpers in Australia. We have T-shirts but it's not the same.

Liturgically, apart from Masses shaded by gum trees with the congregation on folding chairs and some wearing boardies (shorts), there is no difference between the hemispheres. A case could perhaps be made for summer weight vestments but at least some clergy feel free to ditch the heavy chasuble and run with alb, stole and sandals. Quite Christ-like really!

Many Australians include on their bucket list experiencing "a white Christmas" and as you do the hot concrete dance on the way to the beach you understand. In spraying "snow" on windows, leaving carrots for visiting reindeer and singing songs about winter wonderlands, are we Aussies merely distracting ourselves or yearning for a lost spiritual homeland?

Whatever the answer to that rhetorical question, the fundamental truth is that Jesus comes as a much-anticipated, tiny, vulnerable baby for *all* of us, everywhere. The life that we say began on Dec. 25 changed the lives of each of us, and *that's* what matters.

*[Tracey Edstein is an associate of the Dominican Sisters, the convenor of the Waratah Associates of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands. For many years, she was a secondary teacher of English and religious studies, and religious studies coordinator in schools with close ties to the Marist and Dominican charisms. She then served as editor of Aurora, the award-winning monthly magazine of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, Australia. She is an active parishioner involved in adult faith formation and a freelance writer.]*



# The blessings of celebrating Christmas in an Indigenous village in India

BY FRIDA TOPPO | DEC. 28, 2021



Sister Leema leads a dance, assisted by children who are boarders and joined by children of the village of Ratanpur, North-Eastern India, during Christmas 2020. (Courtesy of Frida Toppo)

The celebration of Christmas among the poor and simple Indigenous people of Ratanpur, in the Aizawl Diocese, North-Eastern India, was a new and unique experience for me and the people of that village.

The place is 16 kilometers away from St. Mary's Church in Hailakandi. I had visited Ratanpur on Nov. 1, 2020. After my transfer to Assam from Manipur state in North-Eastern India, it was my first visit to this village, and it touched my heart for my life and mission as a nun.

When we returned, I was left with many questions, like "How is it that vulnerable and marginalized people — through no fault of their own — face many challenges and lack many opportunities to live a dignified life?" It is simply because of where they are born. When will those villagers, my brothers and sisters, come up in life and live a better and dignified life?

My heart remains there. I constantly ask myself if I can do something for them.

There are only seven Catholic families, numbering 27 persons in total, in the village. Each family lives in a small bamboo house surrounded by betel nut trees. They are simple and loving people, with no modern technology like computers, the

internet, television sets and smartphones. They lag behind in education and the employment opportunities of urban life. They do not have access to many comforts and conveniences available to other people in their society.

Their village is far away from the daily market, and having no means of income, they are not able to afford nutritious food. But the people of the village are close to the environment that provides them sustenance and subsistence.

Life in this remote village seems so hard, lonely and dry, but they have bright smiles on their faces, and loving, caring hearts. This is a priceless attribute we can notice in each of them.

After the holy Mass on that day, they shared their meal with a lot of concern and love for us — a group of priests, nuns and lay men and women who went there to celebrate with the villagers an early Christmas during this ongoing pandemic.

And then I thought again that I would do something for them as Christmas drew near. One of our community discussions was about the celebration of Christmas. Our Maria Sadan convent leader, Sister Little Flower, asked us how we would like to celebrate Christmas.

My mind and heart went to Ratanpur because every time I





Fr. Michael Toppo (left), Sister Leema (center), Sr. Frida Toppo (right) and some of the children who board at the Nirmala children's home run by the sisters (Courtesy of Frida Toppo)

had a good meal at the convent, I was remembering them. So, I wanted to celebrate Christmas with them.

I expressed my thoughts to the sisters I live with, and was happy when everyone agreed. On Dec. 20, Sister Little Flower, along with some of the girls who board with us, went ahead of us and decorated the small bamboo church in the village.

Some parish youth also joined us to encourage and cheer them up. Fr. Michael Toppo, the assistant parish priest and principal of St. Mary's School, went with us taking his music and choir group.

We had prepared a delicious meal and Christmas cake at our convent and took them to the village. As we were approaching the place, I could see young children waiting at the road far away from the village hill to welcome us with their innocent, loving smiles.

We had a meaningful Christmas Mass celebration by Fr. Toppo. After the Mass, we had a brief entertainment of song and dance provided by the boarding girls and youth. We also conducted some games for children and parents, giving away prizes like T-shirts, fancy caps, glasses and cups.

We were so pleased to notice that young and old — everyone — participated in all the programs with hearts and minds. We were so happy that they enjoyed themselves! It was amazing to see the gentle and loving smiles on everyone's faces.

After the program, we served a fellowship meal together.

Before we left the village, we visited all the families and prayed for them.

When it was time for departure, Monika Suwer, a 35-year-old mother, said, "We do not get any visitors to our village. We are glad that you all came. We were excited and were waiting for you all from the morning. I feel sad to leave you."

Helena Sumer, the senior-most woman of the village, exclaimed, "For the first time in our life, we had a great Christmas celebration in the village. I am so glad!"

For my part, I was glad to be there in the presence of Catholics in a remote village of the parish. We spent our day with them, from morning until evening. I was inspired by their generosity in giving their time. Young and old, men and women — all of them — stayed with us till the end.

It was hard to say goodbye to them that day.

I thought to myself: "How rich are they in love and care! How kind and generous they are in giving their valuable time for us!"

Though they are uneducated they showed me how to be simple, to depend, to trust in the providence of God, and to live in joy and peace.

As I look back, all that I can say is that 2020 Christmas with the villagers in a remote corner of North-East India was memorable and enriching for me, and will make a lasting impression on me and my mission. I gained more than I gave them.

Finally, that Christmas visit will prompt my community members and me to make arduous efforts to visit Catholic families in far-flung areas of the parish. We will provide pastoral programs for faith enrichment in families, for the empowerment of men and women, for children's education, and we hope to motivate them to seek new livelihood options.

These initiatives would bring some solace to the villagers and enable them to live better, more dignified lives, knowing their rights as villagers. Our Christmas gift to them!

*[Frida Toppo is a Missionary Sister of the Immaculate from Chhattisgarh, Eastern India. Educated by the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, she began her ministry teaching in a school of the Indian Missionary Society fathers, and has continued teaching for more than 15 years in different schools. She also completed a degree in history and currently is serving as a teacher and is in charge of girl boarding students at St. Mary's School in Hailakandi, Assam, India.]*



# Christmas: A season of homecoming

BY ROSEMARY WANYOIKE | JAN. 4, 2022



Children in Nairobi, Kenya, ride on a makeshift train Dec. 25, 2019, during Christmas celebrations. (CNS/Reuters/Njeri Mwangi)

The Christmas season is characterized by movement. If I were to rename it, I would call it “a season of homecoming.” At the time of the Annunciation, when Mary was given the message by the angel Gabriel and became aware of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy, we are told that Mary ran into the hill country to a town in Judah and stayed with her cousin for three months and then went home (Luke 1:39, 56).

Before the birth of Christ, there was a census and people were called to gather in various places (Luke 2:1). So, consciously or unconsciously, the birth of Christ brings us energy to move from our comfort zones and look for others. It is one moment in the year that the longing for communion is conspicuously felt. It gives us the desire to be with our loved ones, some of whom we may not have seen for a while.

I grew up in a rural area, and we had relatives living in the city. At that time, Nairobi was the only city in Kenya. Christmas was one season that we were almost certain that our aunts and cousins would come home; every Christmas

we looked forward to it. I remember my aunt who worked and lived in the city with her three children — she had made it a practice to come home for Christmas. This brought a lot of joy to my family and a sense of oneness.

Coming home was not enough; a lot of energy also went into preparing meals, and some families who were able got new outfits for that day.

This solemnity has always fascinated me because — though it is only for a day — the preparations begin very early. Some of the shops will put up decorations as early as August! Christmas carols will also begin to be played on the radios and televisions just as early. I remember how on Christmas Day, besides the special meals, we also used to dance, and the joy was immeasurable.

As you might expect, people won’t go to see their relatives empty-handed. This season is one where generosity is explicitly demonstrated. People buy gifts for relatives and friends. The host will be purchasing the type of food they think their loved ones will enjoy eating.

When I was growing up, there was a dish we call chapa-

ti (a kind of pancake made from wheat but harder than the ordinary pancake). It was the “in thing” and characterized the celebration. At that time, it was an expensive meal. Christmas Day for most families was one of the days that people ate the nicest meals.

As an adult, I have not observed much change; the desire for communion has continued to heighten, especially with increasing urbanization. I continue to attest to the goodness that comes with Christmas. There is a joy that cannot be concealed.

I remember that when I was a student nurse, away from home, we had a tradition for Christmas Eve, when the students went around the wards singing Christmas carols and handing gifts to the patients. Before that, we would have been practicing the Christmas songs for hours. It was awesome and this meant so much to me. I learned to think of others, to share what I have with others and be kind to them.

Christmas experience gives me a feeling of what Peter the apostle must have felt at the moment of transfiguration when he said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Matthew 17:4). We all long for happiness and to connect with others; Christmas gives us a glimpse of what this would look like.

It is a time to transform the face of the earth. Where divisions can cease, hope is restored and God with us — Emmanuel — becomes real. While this is a deep desire of many hearts, sometimes this joy of Christmas seems to fade as soon as it comes. Currently, we are experiencing a lot of family breakups and many people feel justified that the situation is the way it is.

This even escalated as COVID-19 pandemic hit our world. The situation in a way makes it appear like the world has come to an end. Loss of livelihood and interruption of social networks seem to have given way to despair and anger such that spouse turns against spouse, child against parent and sibling against sibling. Hearts are broken and life continues as if business is as usual. This takes away the gains made toward making a heaven down here on earth.

Joy is a treasure that no one wishes to lose, so it is sad that anyone lets the joy of Christmas just go like that. It is like the prodigal son coming home and enjoying the unconditional love of the father, and then going back to the

old way of life. The love experienced needs to bear fruit that will last.

As we celebrate this Christmas, let us not treat it as a usual event that comes once a year. Many long to have joy and peace in their life, without finding it. When we experience the joy of Christmas let us look at ways of sustaining it. When people are happy, they are enthusiastic about what they are doing, and life is looked at through a lens of joy and is radiated to others.

One may ask: How do we sustain this joy of Christmas? As people who share with Mary in her joy of Incarnation, let us become people of Visitation. This implies that we move out of our comfort zones and go out to share in the joy of others. We mourn with those who are mourning, remain cognizant of those who need our assistance and be there with them as Mary did with Elizabeth.

Most important of all is that we remain constantly seeking ways to deepen our relationship with God, who will fuel our lives and keep us energized. Here we are being called to be people of prayer. We are to pray not as a duty, but taking up a disposition of contemplation where we can see God in all things and at every moment.

As I advance in age, I realize that one of our setbacks in sustaining the spirit of homecoming is failure to recognize what God is doing in our life. Yet we are told in the song that “great things happen when God mixes with us.” I relate this to the idea of counting our blessings. If we do so, then the veil of pessimism that falls over us when we count the losses is removed and we are able to be our brother’s and our sister’s keeper — since all of us are blessed in diverse ways.

In this way, the commonly used phrase “our richness is in our diversity” will make sense and find a home in us. Come home soon!

*[Rosemary Wanyoike was trained as a nurse before joining the Sisters of Mercy in Kenya. She has worked in Turkana, Kenya, and in Zambia, where she worked with people with HIV/AIDS. After her perpetual profession in 2008, she attended a formation program in Ireland and now directs her community’s formation program in Kenya.]*



# In Immokalee's immigrant community, the Christmas story unfolds among us

BY JUDY DOHNER | JAN. 10, 2022



A refugee family from Haiti celebrates Christmas at a soup kitchen in Immokalee, Florida. The twins were born two weeks after the family arrived in the country. (Judy Dohner)

It was Dec. 23 and I was making a last-minute run to Family Dollar store. To my surprise, Christmas was being put away and Valentine's Day cards and candy were being stocked on the shelves.

Before Christmas becomes a memory, let me share how the Christmas story is being lived out today in a poor little town in Florida. Immokalee (home of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers) is an unincorporated farming community made up of Mexicans, Guatemalans and Haitian immigrants. Jesus is there. The Gospel is alive. One just has to look.

In early fall there was a tsunami of Haitian refugees arriving in Immokalee from the Texas border. It has slowed to a small, steady stream. Most of these refugees are young couples with very young children. Many of the women are pregnant. And this is where Luke's Gospel comes alive, where Jesus is revealed: "And this will be a sign for you."

Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethle-

hem most likely took about five long days. The young Haitian couples coming from Chile and Brazil travel more than 7,000 miles, mostly on foot, for two or three months. Mary was in the last weeks of her pregnancy. These young mothers-to-be are also in the last months of their pregnancies and probably have received no prenatal care. Upon arrival in Immokalee, the young families "come to the church" seeking help and are either "with child" or have recently given birth.

*"In those days a decree went out that the whole world should be enrolled" (Luke 2:1).*

When the Haitians arrive at the Texas border, they are registered and placed in detention. Then, they are sent to addresses of family or friends who have agreed to accept them. The reality in this very poor community is that, upon arrival, they are told there was "no room for them" because the host families are also very poor.

The Thursday after Thanksgiving, a Holy Family visited our center. A young man and his nine-month pregnant wife said they had left detention in Texas and went to stay with relatives in Miami, but these relatives in Miami told them they had no room. They brought them to Immokalee "because there was work."

But the law says undocumented people are not permitted to work. No family, no friends, no home. So they slept in the woods. Then they were told, "Go to the church. The church will help you." Our center does not provide housing. I phoned three local hotels hoping to offer temporary shelter to the couple. Each one said, "We have no room." We found a Haitian woman with two children in a two-bedroom apartment who offered this couple one of the bedrooms until they could find more permanent housing.

*"While they were there, the time came for her to have her child" (Luke 2:6).*

Two other women — one from Brazil and one from Chile — arrived in Immokalee with their spouses in the days before Christmas. Both had been nine months pregnant when they arrived in Texas in late November. Marie Ange delivered her premature baby girl the day she crossed the border. Nadia gave birth in detention two days after her arrival at the border. Both had come seeking help to get their babies' birth certificates, which they were not able to obtain while in Texas.

The Haitian asylum seekers continue to find their way to Immokalee. God continues to speak to them through "angels" who offer good news of help and acceptance. These courageous young men and women are not afraid. They simply trust that God is with them.

*"Do not be afraid for I proclaim to you good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10).*

So, look around! Emmanuel is "God-with-us." God is revealing the Good News everywhere we look. We just have to have eyes to see and ears to hear.

After the shepherds visited the child, "they made known the message that had been told and all who heard it were amazed." May we, like the shepherds "glorify and praise God for all we have heard and seen."

*[Sr. Judy Dohner is a Sister of the Humility of Mary from Villa Maria, Pennsylvania. She has worked with migrants and immigrants for the past 30 years. She returned to the U.S. in 2018 after ministering in Haiti for 16 years and is currently working with Haitian immigrants and refugees in Immokalee, Florida.]*

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