

Advent & Christmas 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 and conflict beset our world from all corners of the globe as we enter this Advent season of 2023. The haunting of environmental disasters — unrelenting heat, fires and floods — also leave their mark. It can be hard to prepare our hearts and souls in this special time of year, this time of anticipation and waiting, this time of suppressed joy, at the prospect of celebrating Christ's coming to us on this Earth. We may need some special help to soothe our spirits and put ourselves in the right frame of mind to welcome Emmanuel — "God With Us."

To assist with this, we at Global Sisters Report have traditionally created special Advent e-books, drawn from sisters' columns published last year, to provide an extra resource for spiritual sustenance and to thank you for your readership. This year's collection includes a few additional columns about Christmas and the Christmas season, to bring some extra joy at a time when the world seems to need it more than ever.

Amid the busyness of this season, we hope you will enjoy, and even savor, these special columns; that you take the "soul time" you need as we start a new Liturgical Year.

Blessings to you and all those you hold dear this Advent and Christmas, and may you have a happy and healthy New Year!

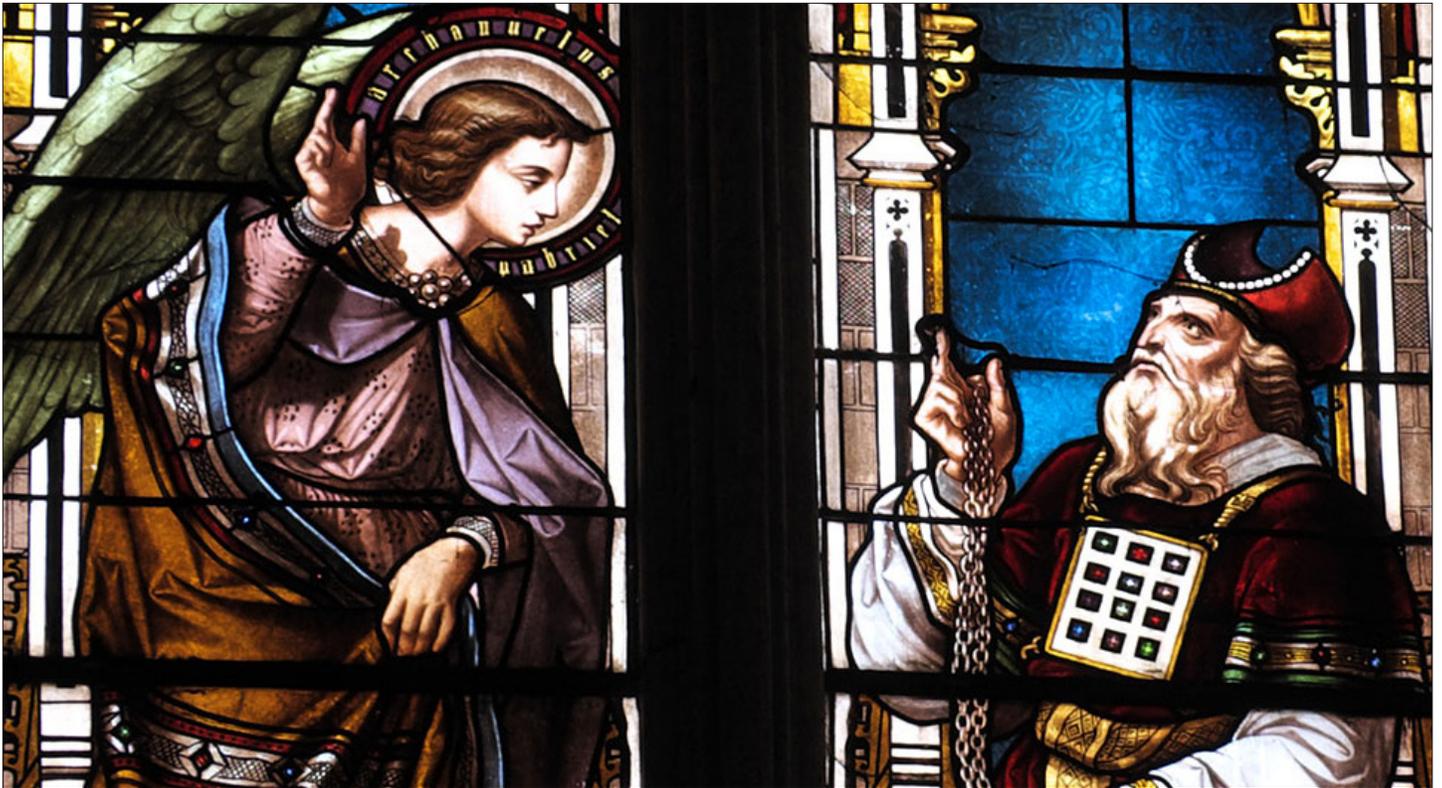
Gail DeGeorge

Editor

On behalf of all of us at Global Sisters Report

Zechariah is my main man for Advent

BY SHEILA CAMPBELL | NOV. 29, 2022



A stained-glass window in Saint-Jean-Baptiste Cathedral in Bazas, France, depicts the angel appearing to Zechariah. (Wikimedia Commons/GFreihalter)

One of my favourite characters from the Advent readings is Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. They say he was a priest, going about his priestly duties. But I bet he was depressed. Why do I say that? Well, he was there, day by day, doing his job and got no rewards for it. He had an elderly wife and no child — that is, no future. Who wouldn't be depressed?

Advent, we are told, is a time of expectation, of joyful waiting, of anticipation. But what about the times when life is not like that?

Aren't there times in our own lives when we just keep going on, doing the work, soldiering on, and not even wanting to stop and ask, "What's this all about?" We are scared that there may be a big void of meaning. We all have our Zechariah moments of depression.

Then God steps in and Zechariah's elderly wife becomes pregnant. Zechariah hears the news via an angel.

When I think of angels, I rarely think of feathery beings, floating around the sky, as is so often portrayed in Nativity scenes. For me, angels are those chance meetings, small encounters, overheard conversations maybe, or unexpected, sound advice from a friend. Those are my "angel moments."

Zechariah has one of these "visitations" from an angel. Is he overjoyed, running around telling everyone? No, his first reaction is of disbelief. "Who, me?" you can almost hear him saying. "You must be joking."

Isn't this often our own reaction to good news? It is as if we are programmed to receiving bad news first. I

used to believe that this was a result of living in a nuclear age, and in a time when wars and catastrophes can be communicated to us with lightning speed. But when I see Zechariah's reaction, I see it is a more inbuilt human response.

And so, he is struck silent. Zechariah needs space and time to absorb, to reflect, to learn. Just like us.

There was a period in my life, around age 40, when I suffered from burnout. I had been working in Brazil for about 13 years and I was both mentally and physically exhausted. Luckily, someone wiser than me stepped in and I was given the respite I needed, a year's sabbatical program with the Sparkhill Dominican Sisters in upstate New York.

They rescued me and let me "be silent" for a year. I must be honest here and say it was not a silent period; there was a lot of group work, common prayer, laughter, and shared tasks. But inside I could be silent. I could do the work of lying fallow, letting my soil (and my soul) be nurtured again.

It certainly built me up and allowed me to return to Brazil and continue there happily until about five years ago.

Zechariah's period of silence was not neatly packaged into an academic year as was my sabbatical programme. He did not know when it would end. He did not know if it would end at all. He just had to trust that somehow this was all in God's plan.

Over and over again, I seem to be drawn into the same biblical theme — trust. Trust is also what gets us through the dark patches, or perhaps the foggy patches, of our own life.

"The more difficult things are, the more we must love, the more we must trust. Without God we can do nothing, but with God we can do all things." These are the words of Mother Mary Martin, foundress of the Medical Missionaries of Mary. She wrote these words in 1954, when she was building the hospital in Drogheda, Ireland, and she was receiving requests from all over the

world for sisters to come and help in the medical field.

I am sure she had her "foggy" days, too, when the future was unclear, and she was torn between the needs in Ireland to build up the congregation and the needs overseas. She talks about a call to trust and to love. That's all.

It sounds so simple, but, as we know, the simple things can be demanding! I obviously need a bit more of it in my life if God keeps shoving examples in my face!

When Zechariah was ready, he was called to make a commitment: Name the child. "His name is John," he said, remembering what he heard from the angel. Now, Zechariah was sticking his neck out, flying against common custom. Everyone was expecting him to give the child his own name. Zechariah Junior, so to speak.

How often are we not also called, after a period of grace, to take a new stand, forge a new path, accept a new job? It seems to be the cycle of life.

And I learn from Zechariah. He did not say, grudgingly, "Oh, all right!" He broke out into a song of praise that we say every day at morning prayer: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel."

Oh, yes, Zechariah is my Advent man. I wonder what he will teach me this year?

[Sheila Campbell is a Medical Missionary of Mary sister of Irish and Brazilian nationality. After an early nursing ministry in Ireland, she did nursing, health education, parish work, and pastoral health care work (specializing in HIV/AIDS) as a missionary in Brazil. She later served in congregational administration in Ireland, and in Brazil with families affected by urban violence and prostitution. Currently, she serves sick and elderly sisters at her congregation's home in Massachusetts.]

Advent: A different kind of joy ride

BY TISY JOSE | DEC. 5, 2022



Sunrise on a road in Uttar Pradesh, India (Dreamstime/Akhtaransa)

The season of Advent brings joyful memories every year. One such memory was when I politely declined an invitation to a birthday bash of a close friend at the onset of Advent 2021. Not that I hate celebrations in an opulent party hall in the company of my friends, but the day would have conflicted with a different joyride I had scheduled on the same day.

The ride was a well-planned four-week preparatory Advent journey toward Bethlehem, to enjoy the greatest birthday bash human history ever has witnessed — the holy birth of Jesus we celebrate as Christmas.

I hit upon the idea of taking along a group of students — the Ambassadors of Hope — with giving and going green on my radar. I wanted to drive home for them the messages: “Giving is better than receiving” and “Earth is our common home.”

Before hitting the road, I collected them for an informal buzz session to ask them about their preparations for Christmas. “Of course, it’s all underway! The orders are

placed for the tallest glittering star-decked tree, glowing candles, snowmen of all sizes, a long-bearded Santa with his reindeer, big cake and turkey, gorgeous wardrobes, hats, suits, boots, colorful gifts for the Babe of Bethlehem and our friends” — and so their list lengthened.

“Wow, that’s awesome,” I affirmed. “But is all this ostentatious stuff befitting to Jesus born in an open manger in the lap of nature? Wasn’t his birthday attended by the poor, lowly, humble and simple humans and animals?”

“Oh, aye, that’s true,” came their unanimous reply.

So I suggested we embark on a short ride as part of the four-week Advent journey on a “road less traveled.” The road might be rugged but it will be strewn with gifts well-pleasing to the Baby of Bethlehem.

The following day, we left our comfort zone and kick-started our ride with baskets filled with foodstuffs, clothes, toys, shoes and socks, pens and pencils, notebooks and other goodies meant for the less fortunate children of a

slum school not too far away from our posh city school.

Besides those things, we took with us two dozen saplings of shade trees to be planted on a preplanned roadside.

After serving food to the hungry poor and planting the saplings, the Ambassadors of Hope were taken to a restaurant where they enjoyed a meal followed by a short sightseeing tour.

When we got back to the school we sat around for a “foray forum” or “debriefing” (like you would have to discuss a film) to assess our joy ride.

But unlike returning from a cinema, I found the students vibrant with new energy. To my questions on each aspect of the trip they joyfully responded that it was really a “joy ride.” They said they had experienced more joy in giving than receiving.

Indeed, the smiles of gratitude and satisfaction on the faces of our less fortunate friends filled us with a winged joy capable of flying us to Bethlehem and beyond. Our interaction with the deprived of our society reminded us of all the blessings and abundance God has given us, for which we ought to be grateful to God and praise him every day.

“What were your gifts to the Babe of Bethlehem?” I asked.

“A green spiritual bouquet made of all the saplings we planted and a fresh colorful garland strung with our acts of kindness, smiles, empathy, compassion, goodwill, love and charity,” came their resounding reply.

At that, I led them in a huge round of applause followed by a hymn of thanksgiving. Then the students joyfully left for home.

I continue my Advent joy ride within the four walls of my convent, where most of the sisters are senior citizens. They gift me with ample chances to go the extra mile in serving the deaf and the lame.

To go or not to go depends on the choice I make, like the one I used in the lead of this story. Sure enough, we are what our choices are. Unlike animals and plants, we humans have the God-given freedom to choose. It’s both a unique privilege as well as a frightening responsibility.

Frightening, because we are free to choose life or death, evil or good, heaven or hell. As God told us in the Bible: “Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The choice always is left to us, without letting anyone else choose for us. Each of us as a sentient human being ought not depend upon others to decide for us what to choose or not. Life is God’s greatest gift to us to be lived in full by making the right choices and glorifying him on earth.

Although each of us has the freedom to make our Advent journeys by different paths, it’s important that we reach our ultimate destination — Bethlehem. If our preparation for Christmas engages us in impulsive buying rather than compassionate giving, fanciful decorations rather than cleansing of our hearts, we are bound to end up elsewhere.

My choice is to make Advent a joy ride by choosing to serve rather than to be served, to be patient rather than angry, to be kind rather than rude, to be spiritual rather than materialistic, to love rather than hate, to be compassionate rather than indifferent, to be altruistic rather than selfish — in sum to be spiritual rather than material.

After our Advent joy ride there welled up in my heart a spiritual joy that no pleasure ride could give. Such a joy ride — driven on a sacrificial paradigm — transmits hope, love, peace and goodwill that the angel choir sang more than 2,000 years ago at the birth of Jesus.

Let’s choose to make this Advent a joy ride that will bring joy to the poorest of the poor, and those pushed to the periphery.

[Tisy Jose is from India, and is a member of the Ursuline Sisters of Mary Immaculate Congregation in Italy. She is an educator and a journalist, and has been a missionary for 55 years. After completing her studies in journalism, she served as the assistant editor to the national views weekly Indian Currents in Delhi. She has worked in interreligious dialogue with professors from Benaras Hindu University, served as the assistant executive secretary on the Commission of Dialogue and Ecumenism, and written extensively on social and religious/spiritual issues.]

Living the spirit of Advent means making the rough ways smooth

BY MARY NGUYEN THI PHUONG LAN (NGUYEN) | DEC. 16, 2022



Dominican sisters in Vietnam bring Christmas gifts to children in the hostel area. (Mary Nguyen Lan)

When the weather turns cold, it signals Advent; the new liturgical year is coming. In Vietnam, the social and religious (especially Christian) activities become joyful as we move eagerly toward the Christmas festival. Everywhere we listen to hymns about Advent and Christmas. It seems very sacred, holy and profound. Different styles of caves (manger scenes) decorated by colorful lights and pretty stars, all kinds of evergreen trees, Santa Claus, decorations — all are displayed around the parish, in shops, restaurants, parks and village roads.

Vietnamese sisters prepare prayer songs or prayer shows for Christmas vigil performances. People also start sending each other beautiful Christmas cards with meaningful wishes. The atmosphere of the Christmas festival becomes more and more bustling and joyful. However, looking on the surface is not enough; the faithful need to go inside the depths of the Christmas mystery to experience the meaning of waiting for the Savior.

Indeed, Advent is a good opportunity for us to recall God's love for humanity through the history of salvation. Through

reliving this mystery, we experience human weakness as well as God's great love, and then we will live more worthily of God's gracious salvation for humankind today. For Advent to be fruitful, every member of the faithful needs to hear and respond to the call of God and St. John the Baptist.

In the liturgical season of Advent, God calls us to be awake and to pray, because there are many people who live as if they will never die. They are lulled by worldly pleasures: drunkenness, worries about life, injustice, corruption, deceit, heartlessness and cruelty. They are fascinated by their passion for fame and power, but they forget that there are surprises which will come in death. For this, Jesus invites us to watch and pray always: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth" (Luke 21:34-35).

We are called to wake up to realize the truth, to recognize the things in life that we should stay away from lest they lead



Children living in the hostel area receive Christmas gifts. (Mary Nguyen Lan)

us to death. To realize the truth, to recognize the wrong, we must pray constantly with God, who shows us how to know the dangers of the enemy. In that quote from Luke, Jesus listed two of the most dangerous enemies to avoid — drunkenness and worries about life — which make the body heavy and the mind tired. When we are tired and heavy, we no longer have enough wisdom and energy to do what God wants. Worrying about life includes things like fame, power, money and carnal desires. All of these can make us no longer desire the Kingdom; “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

And St. John the Baptist proclaimed: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth” (Luke 3:4-6).

The high, rough road could refer to arrogance, deception, cunning, hatred, lack of morality or lack of faith. If the winding, rough road can make us feel uncomfortable, our vices will also disrespect God and make God unhappy. Obeying St. John, we should correct the lifestyle of our hearts and get rid of bad habits to welcome the Lord for the Christmas festival, while looking forward to the day of the Lord’s return — especially welcoming the Lord at the hour of our death.

To welcome the Lord at Christmas means that we need to think of others, bring love and charity to them. God will not be happy if we make a retreat, confess and receive Holy Communion very fervently during Advent — with hearts filled with pride, jealousy and hatred. And welcoming the Lord during the Christmas season will become meaningful when we care about the plight of the poor ... by helping them share the warm joy of the day God’s child was born.

Our Dominican community is trying to live the spirit of Advent, preparing our hearts to welcome the coming of Christ of the world by going to meet the poor workers in the neighborhood where they live. Because of the COVID pandemic, the life of workers in Vietnam has become more difficult because workers’ wages and incomes are reduced. Although the epidemic has been safely controlled and life has returned to normal, the workers have to rent rooms in hostels. They have to spend frugally, not daring to think about eating and drinking enough nutrients, because with their small salary they have to pay for rent, electricity and water, and school fees for their children.

Understanding the plight of the workers in the hostels, we visit, share, and give lovely gifts to their children on Christmas day. We hope our visits will help them and their children feel the joy of Christmas despite their life’s difficulties and challenges. We especially wish them and their families a Merry Christmas season filled with the joy of the Child Jesus. Our benefactors join the sisters in becoming ambassadors of God’s love for everyone, and we wish them — who supported us with Christmas gifts for the poor children — abundant grace and the joy of Baby Christ.

As we wait for the Lord’s coming this Advent, may each of us Christians change our lives with concrete actions: living the faith, practicing charity and love, living justice, and respecting one another, because when the Lord comes, He will judge us by the standard of love and charity. At the last judgment we will hear: “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25: 35-40).

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Let's get real about celebrating Christmas

BY JANE MARIE BRADISH | DEC. 20, 2022



A migrant child from Central America sleeps on his mother's shoulder in Roma, Texas, July 28, 2021, after they crossed the Rio Grande into the United States from Mexico seeking asylum. (CNS/Reuters/Go Nakamura)

When you hear Christmas, what comes to mind? Parties and presents? Travel and short-staffed offices? Concerts and pageants? Crib/manger scenes and hymns and all-too-familiar Scripture readings? When I encountered Christmas decorations and advertisements and music at the end of October, I exclaimed to no one in particular, "It's time to get real!" In my experience, Christmas had become romanticized.

For whatever reasons, we have taken the stories and symbols around Christmas and made them facts. Archeologists and historians have offered insights and real facts, but their insights and teachings are largely ignored and — I'd venture to say — most of the people in the pews have never heard them.

Let's get real: We don't know when or where Jesus was born. But we all have the image of the Holy Family in a cave or shed-type structure on the outskirts of an insignifi-

cant town called Bethlehem.

If Jesus was born in Bethlehem, we have a very pregnant young woman and her new husband traveling to his hometown. That means long walks and/or very uncomfortable donkey rides. Donkeys are great for hauling but not so much for riding because their backs are so wide. She wouldn't have had her woman kin with her, leaving her without much of a support system at a very vulnerable time.

She gives birth in what can be described as a shed or cave. It offered some safety and protection from the elements, but it was far from clean and comfortable. Animals would have provided warmth but also unpleasant smells and potential aggression toward the humans who are sharing their space.

Scripture tells us angels announce the birth, and the

next thing you know visitors are there gawking and bringing odd gifts.

We are told shepherds abandon their flocks to come visit. No way, the flocks were their life and livelihood.

Wise Men, often referred to as kings, bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. No scriptural explanation, just one line announcing the gifts. I can count on one hand how many homilies or reflections I've heard to help us understand the significance of the visitors and their gifts.

The symbolism I think we are missing: Jesus was born in the most unexpected place and was welcomed to earth by the outcasts of society. Shepherds, because their living with and tending animals, broke most of the purity laws of Judaism, were pretty low on the social ladder, just above lepers. The Wise Men represent God being present to all people, not just the obedient Jews. Their gifts: ancient symbols of royalty, Jewish practice, and death.

Mary, Jesus' mom, is often portrayed as meek and mild. Let's get real, she was not! She was one of few people I can find in Scripture that "talked back" to the angel of God and didn't get "zapped." For example, Zechariah lost his ability to speak; Jacob wrestled and ended up limping.

Mary asks the angel of God all kinds of questions before agreeing to become the mother of Jesus, not really knowing what that would mean, and proclaiming her fiat — her yes to God. But that's not the Mary we hear about in the Nativity narrative.

Joseph, a newlywed himself with a child on the way, is often described and portrayed as a silent onlooker. Maybe. I find it hard to believe he would have just been standing around watching. He would have been very much on alert, protecting his very vulnerable wife and newborn son. And while Scripture tells us shepherds and wise men came to visit, I'd bet my life they were not allowed too close.

Joseph, a wise and attentive man, knew he had to move his family quickly to keep all of them safe. Depending on the liturgical cycle, we may or may not hear the Scripture story of Joseph taking his young family and fleeing. They became refugees to save their lives.

In all probability, Mary was not a docile mom and Joseph did not stand on the sidelines. They were parents who experienced all the joys and challenges and heartache of parents from the beginning of time. They had the added burdens of all the angel of God told them — their child was the long-expected and promised savior and would be both loved and hated.

The hymns we all sing speak about silent night and joy to the world and (hark! the herald) angels singing. No mention is made of fear: Infant mortality in the ancient world was the rule rather than the exception. No mention is made of their being refugees and needing to flee for their lives. There is no mention of all the unknowns that life brings every day. No mention of what it all really means when we "get real."

Jesus, son of God, Emmanuel, God with us, disrupted life as it was known in a specific time and place so many hundreds of years ago. Believers are still trying to figure out what it all means, how we are called to live. How we should encounter those on the margins, those looked down upon or shunned by part or all of society.

To be clear, I have nothing against the pageants and concerts and "warm fuzzy" representations of Christmas. I just want to be real. Celebrate a new birth, God made human. But also recognize and explore what exactly that means personally and communally. God with us — all of us.

Not just believers, not just rule-followers, not just those deemed "acceptable," not just members of whatever "in-group." If we get real, it's all of us.

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Christmas offers the rarest gift we can receive: A celebration of our uniqueness

BY NANCY SYLVESTER | DEC. 22, 2022



(Unsplash/James Anthony)

In her poem “The Poet Visits the Museum of Fine Arts,” Mary Oliver reflects on the rose, describing it both on its solitary journey to full flowering with “its exotic fragrance” and in doing that, how it offers “something, from its small self, to the entirety of the world.”

In a year when the James Webb Space Telescope reveals the birth of the stars — of which our galaxy alone has over 200 billion — and in the great expanse of the universe with its billions of galaxies, an individual can feel so small, insignificant, and alone.

When access to social media brings us face to face with all the shifting and conflicting worldviews embodied in the 8 billion human beings now occupying our one planet, an individual can lose a sense of grounding or rootedness amid the confusing values and beliefs.

The immensity and complexity of the world in which

we live can be overwhelming. Yet, the invitation is there for each of us to become who we are at our essence, at our core. Like the rose, each of us has our own exotic fragrance and we each have something to give to the entirety of the world.

Those words speak to me of the season we are in — a time of preparation, of awakening to, and celebrating the fullness of life. Each year, Advent invites us to consciously anticipate Divine Loving come alive. Each Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus in his uniqueness and in his universal gift of self, transforming our evolutionary process.

In Jesus we have the embodiment of God, Divine Mystery. Born into a time of great upheaval within first century Palestine, he was caught between the Jewish beliefs and the insights that arose within him as he matured. His followers and those who would write down their memories of this man, understood that Jesus offered a differ-

ent way of being in the world. His unique fragrance challenged the purity laws of his time. He welcomed those who were thought to be unclean. He spoke with women. He befriended lepers, tax collectors, the lame and those possessed with demons. He identified with the words of the prophet Isaiah to bring good news to the poor.

He was willing to live out of his most authentic self, and he offered it to the world. Yet his life ended ignominiously. Betrayed, abandoned, crucified. I suspect he felt alone, confused and insignificant — wondering if this was all worth it.

What permeated his consciousness was the knowledge that he had to become who he was. He kept evolving into the person who was firmly grounded in Divine Loving, in the God he called Abba. He kept evolving into his Divine self. Christmas celebrates that Divine Mystery in its completeness in Jesus and as it continues unfolding in our lives.

Christmas offers us the rarest gift we can receive: a celebration of our uniqueness and our relationship to each other and the world in its entirety. We are not alone, but we are unique. Like the rose we each have our own fragrance and our own thorns — those desires, attractions, and needs that blind us to the gift within us. That keep us from opening that gift of self.

Our contemplative practice makes us aware of that gift and deepens our desire to open it, freeing us to engage all that distracts us and keeps us from seeing who we are.

When we do choose to open that gift, we are invited to live out of Christ consciousness as you and me. It is to embody the good news Jesus preached 2,000 years ago. It is to offer our unique exotic fragrance to the world.

The universe is vast and change is constant. However, each of us in our uniqueness is essential to the present and emerging future. Our source is Divine loving — intimate and unending.

We won't find that present under the Christmas tree, but do not be fooled. It is within us just waiting to be unwrapped.

May you have a blessed and Merry Christmas!

[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.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/227226.

The meaning and challenge posed by the first Christmas

BY SUJATA JENA | DEC. 23, 2022



(Unsplash/James Coleman)

Since the first day of Advent, I have been reading, listening and reflecting on the mystery of God becoming human, the Immanuel “God with us” — the first Christmas!

I understand that Christmas is not about jingle bells, plum cakes, glittering costumes, sumptuous parties, or seven-star palaces. It is about the refugees and migrants; the internally displaced; the struggle of Elizabeth to have a child; night watch shepherds; the martyrdom of innocent children; homeless wanderers; and daily wage laborers. For me, this is the true meaning of the Nativity of Christ, the first Christmas Day.

Christmas is a great feast not only for Christians but for the whole world, for humanity at large. Almost everyone celebrates Christmas, regardless of any differences: caste, creed or language. Unfortunately, today this great feast is commercialized and the importance of the feast of God becoming human — and one among us to unite us in his love — is lost. It has become a mere social celebration.

I would like to reflect more on the deeper meaning of

Christmas so that I may realize and be able to celebrate the coming Christmas in a meaningful way.

Today, it seems like the world is governed by a few powerful corporations, and a few crony capitalists control the world order and geopolitics. We find power struggles everywhere. Even in some families, there is a power struggle between husband and wife, parents and children, or brothers and sisters. In society, there are struggles between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, and the elite and the bourgeois. Even in some religious communities, there are power struggles among members.

Every nation wants to be powerful, which is one reason why we witness prolonged wars in some parts of the world. When power meets power, the outcome is a power struggle. When a powerful nation helps a poor nation, the outcome is alienation: the powerful nation looks upon the vulnerable as one who depends on them, and subjugates them by meeting their needs and never allowing that nation to come into equal relationship. As a result, when power meets vulnerability, the outcome is alienation, separation

and dependence.

However, when vulnerability meets vulnerability, the outcome is intimacy.

That's what we find in the birth of Jesus. God — so powerful, almighty and omniscient — meets the vulnerable human beings enslaved by the powerful. God comes down and becomes one among us to save and set us free — from every form of slavery and sin.

That is why Christmas becomes a feast of vulnerability to experience freedom, dignity and the grace of God in and through Jesus. This feast invites us to become vulnerable, to join with the vulnerable. This is the entire message of Jesus.

Jesus is born in Bethlehem as a vulnerable, helpless baby. Mary and Joseph came to the stable when there was no place for them; Mary and Joseph gave birth to the child Jesus, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and placed him in the manger. God becomes vulnerable in meeting us who are weak.

Today when we ask about the meaning of Christmas, many equate it with cakes, new dresses, toys and Santa. This is how we destroy the real meaning of Christmas.

To understand the real meaning of Christmas we need to reflect from the perspectives of those who were related to the first Christmas in history.

For God the Father, Christmas is giving as we find in the Scripture, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Hence, giving is Christmas. Today, the giving culture is slowly getting lost. We need to learn to give.

For Jesus, Christmas is self-emptying: "Who, though he was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God. ... Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of man" (Philippians 2:6-7).

Christmas for the Holy Spirit is empowerment, as in, "The holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). We are to empower ourselves with God to empower others.

Self-surrender is Christmas for Mary: "And Mary said,

'I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word' " (Luke 1:38). If she had not surrendered, Christmas would not have been a reality.

For Joseph, Christmas is obedience. Joseph did not understand what was happening and what God was telling him through the angel but obeyed God's will (Matthew 1:19-24). When we live a life of obedience God becomes a reality in our life.

For shepherds, Christmas is living out of a life of simplicity. The shepherds were ordinary people living in hilly regions. They listened to the angel (Luke 2:8-16) and went ahead to meet Jesus.

Christmas is humility for the wise men, the Magi. They were humble enough to accept the little child in the manger as their king (Matthew 2:11).

So Christmas is giving, self-emptying, empowerment, self-surrender, obedience, simplicity, and humility: In short, it is the feast of vulnerability. God is compassionate. Compassion inspires justice, equality and fraternity. So let us learn to be one with the people who are helpless, downtrodden, rejected, neglected and poor. Let us take this message and celebrate this Christmas with its true meaning.

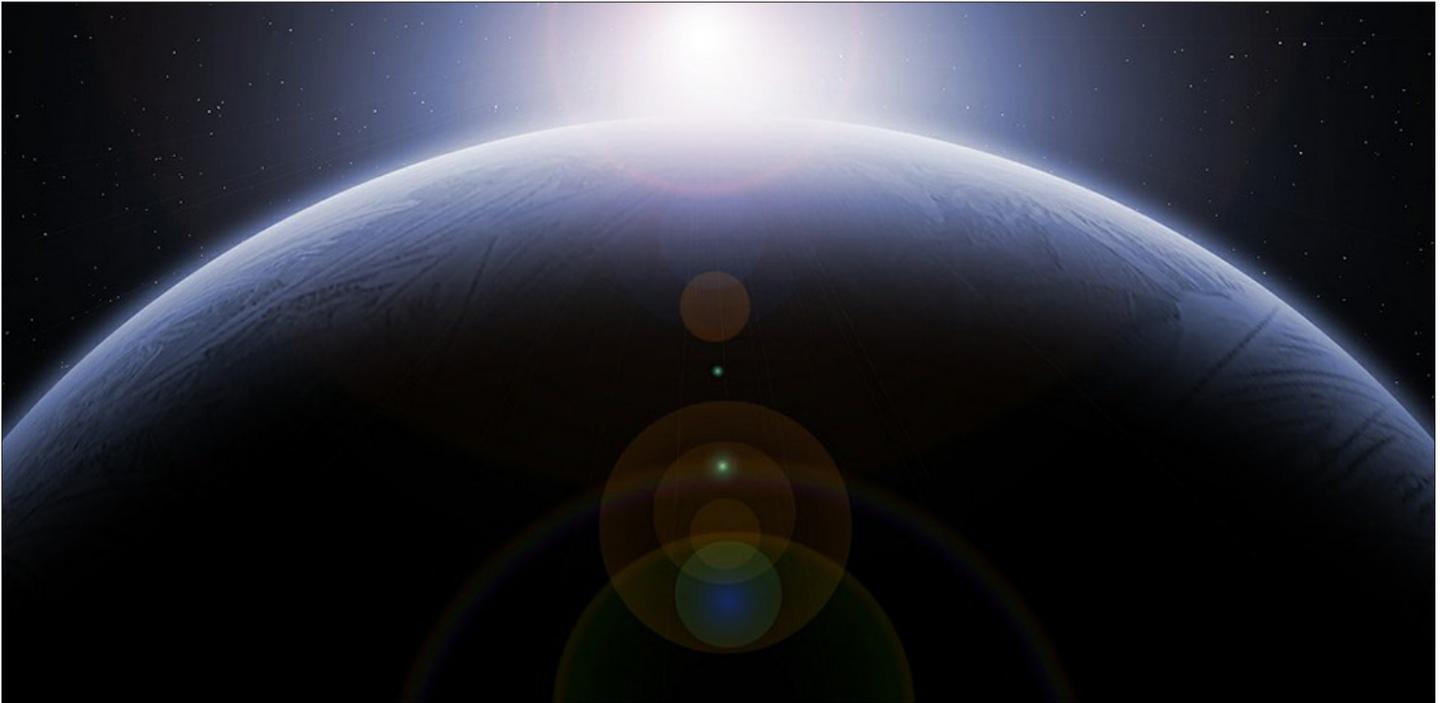
Today in the context of war, corruption, exploitation, discrimination, rape, drug abuse, and broken families, the invitation is to listen intently to the heartbeat of God. We need to think like God, and dream like God. Listening intently to the heartbeat of God and effectively living it in our daily lives will make Christmas a reality.

I pray that the virtues of the first Christmas guide my life as I accompany the vulnerable in an attempt to build his kingdom here on Earth.

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We are called to a new incarnation

BY CHERYL ROSE | DEC. 27, 2022



(Pixabay/LoganArt)

I have always loved this word: Incarnation! It captures the glorious mystery of God becoming human in the person of Jesus! Incarnation was a sacred word, bringing a sense of awe to a grade school child who waited in joyful anticipation for the greatest moment of the year — the wonder of Christmas! Of course, it also meant the lights and decorations in our homes and towns that turned dark winter days into glittering, glowing wonderlands.

Yet even as a child, something way more than Santa Claus stirred in the air for me as our purple-shrouded church joined the centuries of faithful people longing for the coming of a savior. Each Advent candle that we lit reminded us to be patient, for he would come! Despite the natural excitement of toys and gifts, and cookies and trees, the plaintive, haunting notes of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” stirred a longing that every soul sensed at some deep level.

The silence of winter nights drew us into our longing for something to ease the darkness and sadness that lurked in the shadows of life on this earth. Young and old alike yearned for the Messiah to bring light to the weary world. Disillusioned hearts searched for something real that no amount of tinsel could promise: incarnation — the unimagined gift, the outrageously hopeful miracle that God would enter our human experience and take on the full gamut of this journey of ours, and for one reason — to help us know how to be human!

How many years have I welcomed that Advent season, ready to enter deeply into pondering the darkness around me — in my own little life, and in the midst of seemingly unsolvable, desperate problems encircling the world? From every corner came cries for justice, mercy, compassion and peace. Advent waiting became Advent longing and yearning and aching for a peace we could not construct ourselves. And as we grew older, the sobering realization dawned on us that only “You

satisfy the hungry heart.”

But finally, there came a time when things shifted a bit for me, and I began to realize that I, too, was incarnated! My soul took human form so that I could learn many great lessons on this human journey. My “incarnation” meant experiencing hunger and physical pain — and accidents and disappointments, and heartache and failure — all great teachers of incalculable lessons. So too my incarnation has meant delicious feasts and the warmth of human touch, and the boundless freedom of dance and running and swimming! It has meant tender love, rich relationships, listening with compassion and touching the pain of others. It has meant a million human joys and delights ... great books, breathtaking music, and ecstasies over the beauty and wonder of Earth’s skies and rivers, oceans, mountains and forests!

Incarnation opened my human mind and heart to experience the holiness of an infant’s face, a child’s innocent play, a bird’s effortless flight, a beloved elder’s familiar, worn hand, so sacred in mine. And God walks among us in all of this, showing us how to bear ecstasy as well as sorrow.

My incarnation baptized me into discipleship, set my feet on his path, and began an apprenticeship of “putting on the mind and heart of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). Meditating on his life dispelled many false assumptions about who God is, what being a good person involves, and what really matters in this human journey. The incarnated Christ modeled living without ego, without duality. He embodied the amazing truth that all are one! We are one with God, we are one with every person of every culture and religion, and with every blade of grass, every drop of water, every plant and animal cohabitating with us. His example was so clear, his words so unequivocal it’s hard to understand how

anyone could miss or skew the message. If we celebrated not just his coming to Earth, but his living on Earth — how he saw things — “You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you” (Matthew 5:21-22); how he treated people without judgment, without excluding, without anything but mercy and acceptance — the world would look vastly different. How can anyone fail to see who he was and the example he set for our human living?

This year I am longing once again for the Messiah’s coming, all too aware of the weight of darkness: of the shocking gun violence in our country, of the wrenching suffering of Ukraine and other places of staggering injustice, of lies and truth-spinning that have ignited hatred and division. And as I pray for the coming of the light, I’ll also be thanking Jesus for entering our human experience and coaxing us to a new consciousness. Early on, he called us to come and follow him, telling us we could do all he did and more, inviting us to leave all the nonsense and walk on water with him. Let’s pick up our incarnation.

Let’s expand our incarnated selves to Jesus proportions! Advent is about incarnation — his and ours!

[Cheryl Rose is a member of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary. With an academic background in science and in religious studies, she taught high school chemistry, physics, and theology for 26 years in several congregational high schools, also serving as department chair and campus minister. She created curricula for Center for Learning and NASA, and served on her community vocation/ formation team. Presently she is engaged full-time in retreats, spiritual direction, and workshops and programs that facilitate spiritual and personal growth, including the Enneagram.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/227166.

Offering our gifts to others: Revealing Christ's presence at Epiphany

BY HELGA LEIJA | JAN. 6, 2023



Sr. Helga Leija works on her piñata for Epiphany. (Courtesy of Helga Leija)

"And on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11).

I have heard that the culture of a nation resides in the heart and soul of its people. No matter where I have been, I have always tried to remain true to the traditions I learned when I was growing up. These traditions help me to feel at home and connected wherever I go. I have been in many different places, and traditions always offer an anchor back to my culture.

I am now in the U.S. Midwest and decided to celebrate Epiphany with the sisters by sharing a tradition dear to my heart, the art of piñata-making. I have been sneaking into the art loft every few days for a couple of months now to give another coat of papier-mâché to the piñata to harden it enough to make the structure.

Many people envision piñatas as small cardboard donkeys that little kids break at birthday parties. However, the kind of piñata I am making is the traditional one: a star with seven points.

The origins of the piñata are uncertain at best. It is believed that piñatas go all the way back to the ancient Chinese. It is said that the Chinese filled clay pots with seeds in the shape of animals and broke them during the New Year. Marco Polo brought the Chinese tradition to Italy during one of his trips, where it was called a pignatta, meaning "clay pot," and from there, it went to Spain. The Spanish Augustinian Missionary Friars brought it to Mexico in the late 1500s.

When the friars arrived in Mexico, they noticed the Indigenous people were filling clay pots with cocoa seeds and breaking them in a ceremonial game during a festival called Panquetzalitzli in honor of Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. These festivals were celebrated



Sr. Helga Leija's piñata for Epiphany (Courtesy of Helga Leija)

in the winter during the dates that coincided with Christmas. Therefore, the friars adapted the piñatas as a symbolic evangelization tool.

The friars added seven points to the clay pot to make a star to represent the seven capital sins: pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. They dressed it with bright colors and tinsel to symbolize the vanities of the world and the temptations of the devil.

The piñata must be broken with a stick that represents virtue, and the person must wear a blindfold because faith is blind. The stick, breaking the piñata, symbolizes virtue overcoming temptation and evil, and so the goods stored inside the piñata fall to the ground as gifts from heaven.

These days, piñatas are filled with candies, fruits and small gifts. I added dark chocolate, bags of nuts, fancy cookies and other goodies for my community.

The sisters looked at the finished piñata and told me it was too pretty to break, but that is the whole point of it! For me, it is about sharing culture, creating memories, laughter and bonding. It is all about sharing a part of myself that is deeply meaningful and pointing the way to Christ. If culture and traditions are not shared, they are lost forever. I am grateful for what has been handed down to me.

The feast of the Epiphany reveals to me the life I carry within me, the voices of all those who came before me, and the person I will become. I share from the abundance I have received. In offering my gifts to others, I reveal the presence of Christ to others.

[Sr. Helga Leija is a trained and experienced translator and a sister in transition to the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas. She joined Global Sisters Report as Spanish liaison in July 2022. She earned a bachelor's degree in translation studies from the University of Texas in Brownsville and a master's in religious studies from the University of the Incarnate Word. She has served as a preschool, elementary and high school teacher in bilingual and dual-language classrooms. She volunteers for Translators without Borders. She enjoys art journaling and cooking Mexican food.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/229451.

Gifts of generosity and love, like those of the Magi, transform families' lives

BY MARÍA ELENA MÉNDEZ OCHOA | JAN. 11, 2023



A paper angel is pictured with a description of the child and his or her wants and needs. Someone bought a gift, and volunteers prepare to give it to a family during December 2022 at Catholic Social Services in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. (Courtesy of Sr. María Elena Méndez Ochoa)

As part of our social pastoral ministry, the sisters of my community and I set the stage in early December to imitate the shepherds and wise men. We set out to bring joy to children of low-income families in the communities we serve in Alabama at the Guadalupe Multicultural Services Centers in Eutaw, and Catholic Social Services in Tuscaloosa.

To make this a reality, we first spoke with the families and enrolled them in our program. The children's Christmas wishes were then written on paper angels and placed on Christmas trees at Holy Spirit and St. Francis of Assisi parishes in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Parishioners were invited to take one home and buy what each child wanted for Christmas. About two weeks later, people returned the angels they had chosen, along with the gifts they had purchased. Then a team from the parishes and the Social Services Center did every-

thing we could to fulfill the children's wishes, placing each angel with the items according to family.

The centers began to fill up with things like dolls, strollers, balls, clothes, shoes and jackets. Meanwhile, the ladies in charge of receiving and preparing the gifts were enjoying themselves, imagining the moment when they could call the family to pick them up. The gifts had to arrive in their homes before Christmas to surprise the little ones on Christmas Day. For me, one of the gifts I received was witnessing the generosity of so many people who gave with joy, even without knowing the children or the families they were helping.

There were events throughout this preparation process that shaped my Christmas. For example, one day, four young Guatemalan men arrived at my office, each carrying a huge bag of Christmas gifts — the



Srs. Edith Lugo, Teresa Aguiñaga, and Marta Lucía Tobón sing carols to the child God at Christmas. (Courtesy of Marta Tobón)

bags were almost half as tall as the men! But what surprised me was not the size of the bags but the smiles, joy and satisfaction reflected on their faces at their act of donation and generosity — because I knew they were needy themselves and were giving out of their poverty and generosity.

Another experience that touched my heart was when I visited a family with seven children, all living in a garage; the oldest was 11 years old, and the youngest was a baby girl a few weeks old. I had gone to fill out the registration form at their home because they had neither a car nor a phone to get to the center to fill it out themselves.

It was evident, as they stood there, that they needed many things: shoes, clothes and also toys. Their situation was dire: The children were not only begging for something for themselves, but the family also needed money for a telephone so that the father could get a job and a used car to get around.

In the context of this situation of deprivation and need, we thought of Jesus being born in a humble manger where shepherds and wise men visited and brought gifts for him and his parents, Mary and Joseph. There was a baby girl and an older girl in this house, both still in diapers, so I told the mother, “The best thing you can ask for as a gift for these two girls are diapers because they are expensive and necessary,” and the mother agreed.

Due to the generosity of other families who, like Magi from other cities, shared their gifts, God blessed this family this Christmas with some much-needed gifts. They were able to purchase a used car and pay their past-due rent; that allowed the parents to get a job for themselves and provide for their family’s security and well-being. The children, for their part, received toys, clothes, shoes and other things that filled them with happiness, and the mother felt more at ease.

Reflecting on my experiences during the Christmas season, I concluded that we live in a consumerist and materialistic culture that has taken Jesus out of Christmas. “Christmas” now exerts a powerful social pressure that is difficult to escape, even for religious sisters. I imagine it’s even worse for parents with limited financial resources who have small children who want and need so many things. I would also argue that this culture is, to some extent, unfair and exclusive to the most unfortunate.

It has brought us great joy to see how we, as religious, have served as conduits for God’s grace, bringing gifts to these families and to many others in our neighborhood. We and those other generous people are gifts — wrapped in the wonderful mystery of love — that God gave to humanity, especially for the most vulnerable and simple members of the community that we serve.

This column was translated by Sr. Helga Leija.

[María Elena Méndez Ochoa, from La Joya, Mexico, entered the Congregation of Guadalupan Missionaries of the Holy Spirit at the age of 19. When she finished her formation she was sent to the United States in 1993 to work in Hispanic ministry at the parish and diocesan level in Florida, Colorado, California, Pennsylvania and Mississippi. Currently, she ministers at Catholic Social Services in the Diocese of Birmingham, Alabama. With a graduate degree in theology and ministry, she is now pursuing a master’s degree in integrative studies.]

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