

In Hopeful Waiting

Advent and Christmas reflections
from sisters around the world



An Advent and Christmas gift from:



GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

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Seasons greetings from Global Sisters Report

The season of Advent has always carried a paradox: it is a time of both waiting and fulfillment, of longing and joy. In a world that moves at a relentless pace, sisters remind us that God is revealed not only in the answers we seek, but in the act of attentive waiting itself. For sisters, this practice is not confined to these four weeks of the liturgical year; rather, it shapes their daily lives of prayer and ministry.

At Global Sisters Report, we are privileged to share glimpses of this wisdom with you. Our reporting is testimony to the courage and creativity of sisters working across the globe, while their own reflections, as seen in our columns, open the door into the spiritual depth that sustains such service. Together, these perspectives remind us that the work of justice and the life of prayer are never separate: they are threads of the same tapestry.

This Advent ebook gathers the voices of sisters who have written for us in the past year, offering their insights as companions for your own journey through the season. Our hope is that their reflections offer not only encouragement for these weeks leading to Christmas, but also guidance for how we might live more attentively year-round.

As we share this collection with you, we also share our gratitude — for your readership, for your accompaniment — and hope these words bring a measure of calm amid the season's busyness.

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

**Soli Salgado
Editor**

On behalf of all of us at Global Sisters Report

Elizabeth firmly said no!

BY MAGDA BENNÁSAR | NOV. 22 2024



(Photo: Pexels/Beyzaa Yurtkuran)

Isabel said "No," but before that, a few months earlier, she had believed and said yes to the impossible. Her life changed history, hers and ours, forever.

I have been dialoguing with this text and its characters for days, and they are so powerful that I am afraid to start writing because it is not easy to bring to light interpretations that are not normally made. If you do, you may be viewed with suspicion in our traditional Church.

But then I hear a voice inside me saying, "More suspicion than what Elizabeth and Mary experienced? Impossible!" How easy and dangerous it is to exalt and pray to the people who accompany us on our journey; but how much more difficult it is to unravel the chronicled truths that are interpreted from an historical context that is now outdated. It is urgent that we strip these truths of their patriarchal trappings in order to see them in the light of Ruah and the signs of today.

Deconstruct in order to reconstruct. This is the story of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is considered a hinge between the Old and New Testaments because she accepted the angel's announcement to her husband, the priest Zechariah. Although we are not told so, she is one of the largely invisible women who made

the Incarnation of Jesus possible because her acceptance of God's plan parallels that of Mary of Nazareth.

Both women, full of life, yet against all odds, are at the forefront of the Gospel. They are practicing Jewish women and, because of their openness to the Spirit of the living God, their lives make it possible for a tradition that was dying out at that time to evolve, and to move away from the old in order for something new to emerge. This is what the evangelists tell us with passion.

"Deconstruct in order to build: this is the story of the women of the Bible and our own. Evolution will come if we assume the ministry of saying no to the old, of pushing open that door that seems to lead into a void." (Sister Magda Bennásar)

The barrenness of Zechariah and Elizabeth signifies the sterility of the Jewish institution, expressed in its disbelief in taking the step from logic to faith: Zechariah replied to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel, (which means "the strength of God"), who stands before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you

will be speechless and unable to talk... because you did not believe my words..." (Luke 1, 18 – 21)

This muteness implies that Judaism, represented in the figure of the priest Zechariah, ceased to nourish his faith; it signifies that his relationship with God is more about fulfilling God's laws and numerous precepts. Muteness also indicates that prophets no longer rise up because their words no longer ignite the spark of faith in people's hearts.

From that point on, in the biblical account, it is Elizabeth who has the last word because she did believe and, therefore, was filled with the Spirit of God Who, through her simple life and openness to Ruah, makes her words prophetic.

We know from the texts that there is a beautiful story interwoven here, which is the angel's announcement to Mary of Nazareth. The dialogue is absolutely fascinating! The young Mary, in her transparent humility, asks questions of God's representative (cf. Luke 1, 34). Unlike Zechariah, the representative of the priestly institution, Mary's attitude is open and receptive. She does not ask for guarantees; she embraces the mystery, trusts, and throws herself into an experience that changes history and opens for us a path of life, of gestation, of accepted pain in order to give birth to God's plan.

Mary accompanies Elizabeth; their pregnancies are a joy and a mystery for them. The elderly woman with the younger woman, the younger woman with the elderly woman; as in our communities, all pregnant with life, united by the same feeling.

As I have said, it is Elizabeth who speaks when the baby is born. According to Jewish tradition, in that patriarchal culture, it is the father who names the child... and he would also give him his own name.

"But his mother (Elizabeth) said in reply, 'No. He will be called John.'" (Luke 1, 60)

Elizabeth draws strength from the sincere commitment of her life to the God, and she receives the word that will be heard throughout history. With that inner authority, she bends the arch of the institution and its patriarchy; and it will be Zechariah himself who, by obeying God's plan through her, will recover his speech, now more docilely, from the house where they lived, and not from the temple where he worked as a priest, praying on behalf of the people.

And here we are, dear sisters, at this historic turning point. Perhaps many of us feel sterile because of this or that institution...

Supported by that word, by that woman, by Elizabeth, I want to share that this time in which we live is a time for attentive listening so that we may become more and more servants of the Word of God, which has the power to tear down the iron towers of institutions and to give voice to those whom the institution renders invisible.

Our call to be prophetic, which we received when we were baptized to be priests, prophets, and pastors, and then confirmed in a very powerful way when we made vows or promises of consecration, shows us a path of renewal and evolution.

Sometimes it will be the voices of our older Sisters who

will say, like Elizabeth, "No! Not that way! Let's not perpetuate traditions that ignore the Gospel, which—with its transparency, unsettling nature, and internal dynamism—leads us into the unknown and, if it is from God, will be good."

Other times, the younger ones among us will have to propose projects to update and make our ministries authentic through life and word.

Deconstruct in order to reconstruct: this is the story of the women of the Bible and our own. Evolution will come if we assume the ministry of "being hinges," of saying no to the old and pushing open that door that seems to open to emptiness, yet is the path of faith and the imminent future of consecrated life, life in the Spirit.

Jesus had to separate Himself from the institution because it prevented him from being Himself. The institution tried to remove Him from our midst, but His Spirit is what permeates our lives; it is what makes possible the gestation that this historic moment needs. It is for this that we responded to His call.

Saying no may seem negative, but it can make it possible for us to close the underground cellars and open ourselves to the light. Already from the house, his house, the place where the Spirit dwells, the two give life to John the Baptist, who will show us the way that leads to Jesus.

Today we give life to these stories that are there to be reincarnated in the different languages of today.

We say no so that we can say yes and allow life to continue to evolve.

Translated by Sister Mary Rose Kocab, oviss

[Maria Magdalena Bennásar (Magda) of the Sisters for Christian Community is from Spain. Studies in theology gave her a foundation for the charism of prayer and ministry of the word with an emphasis on spirituality and Scripture: teaching, conducting retreats and workshops, creating community and training lay leaders in Australia, the U.S. and Spain. Currently, she is working on eco-spirituality and searching for a space to create a center or collaborate with others.]

What is it about Advent?

BY TRACEY EDSTEIN | NOV. 25, 2024



(Unsplash/Eric Rai)

Visiting a renowned public garden when the annual Christmas light display was in full swing, a dear friend accompanying me said, "I don't suppose we'll see a reference to Jesus."

As the sun set and darkness fell, at almost 8 p.m., the gardens, resplendent in daylight, came alive. Oversized beribboned Christmas gifts, the Mad Hatter's tea party, Santa Down Under led by six white boomers (acceptable again post-Rolf Harris?), elsewhere another sleigh led by the obligatory reindeer, a sound and light version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," a carousel and a Ferris wheel, both operating, Cinderella's glass slipper magnified many times, Santa's train and Santa's plane, and so on.

All was magical, delightful, enchanting. Nothing not to enjoy.

The soundtrack was enjoyable but decidedly secular — no surprises there.

It's been the case for some time that almost anything can be Christmas-ified: Disney characters, jungle animals as well as local flora and fauna, European-style villages, lit-

erary classics, Aussie beach or bush scenes, and more. It's all commercial gold, of course — I know people who visit the garden annually — and I guess, in a somewhat lame defense, it does introduce a little magic into the busyness and worry of life in the First World.

But then, hark, we turned a corner and heard a sonorous voice narrating a tale that was not from the Brothers Grimm or the happiest place on earth, or even classic literature, but from the gospel of Luke.

"They were in Bethlehem when the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in the manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Lk 2:6-7).

Behold, a larger-than-life-size nativity scene appeared, and as each character was named, the figure was lit gloriously from within. The angel Gabriel was perched in a tree, and his moment was suitably illuminated each time the story was told, on a loop of course.

As we enjoyed the familiar-but-always-new tale, full of

sound and fury, signifying everything, we heard a small voice behind us: "Mummy, there's a fairy in the tree!"

Gabriel may have been suitably mortified — fair enough — but really, who could blame the little girl? She's been brought up in a world where fairy gardens and fairy dresses, fairy cakes and fairytales (although generally far more sanitized than the Grimm tales) are ubiquitous and not to be questioned.

So why wouldn't a character in a white dress in a tree at Christmas time be a fairy? What else could it be?

When my parents' generation was growing up, treats and celebrations were few and far between. Christmas was eagerly anticipated, yet by today's standards, it was a low-key affair.

Culturally, Christmas in the southern hemisphere struggles to match the impact of a northern Christmas simply because of the surfeit of light we experience. We are not awaiting the coming of the light; we are bathed in light. And in states where daylight saving reigns, we have even more light! I know — not really — but it feels like it. If you take a drive to see Griswold-type homes, you have to wait until it's actually dark to appreciate their splendor. Similarly, Christmas light extravaganzas such as that described above don't begin until 7 p.m. or later.

All the moving pictures and musical delights of these entertainments are gorgeously enticing, but I found myself drawn to the simpler (relatively speaking) offerings. There is something about a purer light that beckons you. For example, an avenue of shimmering globes — or were they hot air balloons? — compelled me to walk that way. I've seen images of other light shows — for that's really what they are — that create a tunnel effect through which visitors walk. It's a mini pilgrimage of sorts, bringing people together in a spirit of goodwill.

Even though the intention is largely, if not entirely commercial, I believe that in a secular society, these ex-

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periences (admittedly not within everyone's reach) can offer to the discerning eye glimpses of the story that we all celebrate at this time of year.

The journey, the bringing of gifts, the path lit by a star, the long-awaited baby, the new parents far from home and the familiar, the strangers who insinuate themselves into the tale — all these are classic elements of archetypal stories — but the story is our story.

Indulge in these annual events, if you can, by all means, but why not take the time to draw together the threads and set them against the larger story from which we all arise? If you have children, don't shortchange them, and don't assume they know the story. A nativity — suddenly fashionable — will help, remembering that children will want to engage with and rearrange the characters. Talk about them by name — after all, they belong to the family!

There is little to be gained by disdaining the fairytale aspects of the season; perhaps as a society we get what we deserve? But there is opportunity aplenty in the creative ways in which our contemporary world retells the stories and celebrates them. Be part of it.

[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.]

'God comes, comes, ever comes'

BY REXILLA RAYMOND | NOV. 27, 2024



(Unsplash/David Gabric)

As a religious sister, I often find solace in the evening vespers when we sing a prose from Gitanjali by Rabindranath Tagore:

Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes.

Every moment and every age, every day and every night he comes, comes, ever comes.

Many a song have I sung in many a mood of mind, but all their notes have always proclaimed, 'He comes, comes, ever comes.'

In the fragrant days of sunny April through the forest path he comes, comes, ever comes.

In the rainy gloom of July nights on the thundering chariot of clouds he comes, comes, ever comes.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.

Tagore's profound awareness of God's presence resonates deeply with me. He repeatedly says, "He comes, comes, ever comes." Each line speaks volumes: whether one believes in God or not, God comes and is there, often invisible in everything.

In the field of midwifery nursing, I find the challenges daunting yet extremely rewarding. A significant portion of my work involves acting as a liaison for women who face the pressure to terminate their pregnancies. My medical and surgical nursing career spans over 20 years, enriched by experiences in public health and midwifery.

In India, an unmarried woman becoming pregnant is often seen as taboo and scandalous.

One rainy night in August 2014, during a torrential downpour, a woman was brought to our convent clinic, complaining of excessive bleeding and severe abdominal pain, compounded by hypertension. Since her mother mentioned that she was not married, I assumed she was simply obese, not pregnant. Torn between my desire to help and her refusal to allow a pelvic examination, I felt a storm brewing within me, just like the one outside. Ulti-

mately, I administered pain relief and sent her for a sonogram, which revealed the shocking truth: she was full-term pregnant.

The baby girl she delivered suffered from meconium aspiration syndrome due to the mother's high blood pressure. Tragically, the mother refused to accept her.

A charismatic couple who adopted the infant returned her eight days later, complaining of high fever and using abusive language toward me. My superiors, irritated by their abusive language, reprimanded me for accepting the child into the convent, so one of my midwifery students took her home.

The fate of that child haunted me day and night, especially with the mounting community pressure. During the novenas in honor of Mother Mary's nativity, I prayed earnestly: "Mother Mary, these days many women are crying to you for the gift of a child. Please send a compassionate woman to adopt this baby girl. Let this be my birthday gift from you."

On Sept. 8, Mother Mary's birthday, I received a call from a couple who had lost four infants to miscarriage, expressing their desire to adopt the baby unconditionally. I wept with joy at this miraculous gift of parents for the girl.

After legally handing over the baby, whom I named Zeline, meaning "dignified one," I witnessed her grow as a blessing to her family. During the Divine Mercy novena, I delivered a homily stating, "I am not a biological mother to this child, but I have been instrumental in birthing the living image of baby Jesus in this God-fearing family." Observing her thriving under compassionate parents, I felt the Holy Family of Nazareth accompany me in my midwifery ministry.

I share this experience not to take a stance on the issue of abortion but to emphasize that as a nurse, my role is to collaborate with our birthing God. Just as Tagore experienced God's coming in every situation, every single soul, whether human or not, I too have often experienced God's presence in every being.

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/299001.

In my full-fledged midwifery ministry, the joy of holding each newborn feels akin to cradling baby Jesus. This experience compels me to ensure no woman loses hope in God's miraculous power of creation.

My midwifery ministry has taken on a profound dimension: I strive to do justice for every unborn child, preparing women — married or unmarried — to welcome the baby Jesus in the form of an unwanted child, regardless of gender or identity.

Tagore's poem opens with a poignant question: "Have you not heard God's silent steps?" The essence of this poem is clear: God comes at every moment. His presence is not confined to a single moment but is a continuous, loving occurrence.

Just as Tagore senses God's presence in silent footsteps, we too can experience his coming in our stillness. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:11). This awareness helps us recognize that Advent exists in every season, allowing us to celebrate Christmas at each moment, especially with the arrival of every new life.

[Sr. Rexilla Raymond, from India, belongs to the Sisters for Christian Community. She is a fully trained nurse with 19 years of experience in various roles, including senior staff nurse, geriatric care supervisor, nursing aide school instructor, medical coordinator and hospital nursing supervisor. She has assisted in surgeries such as gynecology and oncology. She has also served as a supervisor for nursing aide students and monitored medical health services outcomes. She received the Best Nurse Award in 2012 and completed the ICN Management Course. Currently, alongside her full-time role as a staff nurse, she is pursuing a post-BSc in nursing.]

Prepare a room at the inn this Advent

BY ROSEMARY WANYOIKE | DEC. 4, 2024



(Unsplash/Kenny Eliason)

I associate the Advent season with the unfolding of a mystery born and raised in the ordinariness of life. Advent is a quiet season whose fruits become visible at Christmas with the birth of Jesus. As we wait for the birth of Christ, like any other waiting, days can be few yet seem long depending on what we engage with while waiting. Understanding the reason for our waiting can help us remain patient. Deciding how to wait is equally important.

Jesus' coming to share in our humanity commemorates a great event in our salvation story. That God will dwell with us and bring about our redemption should provoke in us an action informed by our decision on how we want him to find us.

Growing up, I experienced my mother as a great host. We expected visitors at different times, and I could see the energy she put into it. This involved not only my immediate family but also the neighbors and anyone else who could help make the guests' time with us comfortable. This

mainly happened when a "highly esteemed" visitor was coming.

We started by ensuring the visitor's favorite food was available. The children were charged with cleaning the house, including removing cobwebs and tidying the compound that extended to clearing the bushes. We also made sure our best clothes ("Sunday best") were ready, even if it wasn't a Sunday. It was an event to have such a visitor. Everyone made efforts to do their part thoroughly so our visitor got the best. Some duties, like preparing fodder for the animals, took place the previous day. As the day drew close, there was constant communication with the guest to confirm their arrival. Additionally, a few neighbors formed part of the "waiting team"; my mother would invite them to welcome our visitor. Her visitors became communal.

All this was done to ensure that when the visitor arrived, we could be present with undivided attention. This suggests that before the visitor comes, a lot goes on in the

background, and that a quality visit does not just happen. It requires our entire being.

Imagine all these preparations for an earthly person. How much more should we do for the coming of Jesus, our Redeemer? This entails beginning to prepare ourselves at a personal level and extending that to those around us and the wider society. The kind of effort my mother put into waiting for her visitors gives me a glimpse of the experience we should have when waiting for Jesus' birth. Jesus comes for our redemption; he brings love, joy and peace.

Today, the world needs these gifts more than ever. There is much unrest, as we think of natural calamities, as has happened in Florida with storms and flash floods in Spain. Equally, war is ravaging our world. War has become a way of life. This raises in me a question: How many lives must be lost for the world's leaders to intervene? It is difficult to watch people displaced from their natural habitats, women and children left widowed and orphaned, with nowhere to call home. Many times, I have asked myself: Does anything good happen in our society anymore? These are traumatic situations, and at such times, only God can satisfy our quest for hope. Therefore, Jesus' coming demands a deeper preparation that focuses on both our spiritual and physical well-being.

If what took place in my family when waiting for a visitor is any indication, I figure a list of things to do as we wait for Jesus' coming would look something like this: We would keep remembering the day of the visitor's coming, in this case Christmas. Therefore, all our actions would gravitate toward making that day as special as it can be. Essentially, we would mark that day on the calendar. Likewise, we would need to reflect on our relationship with Christ and determine the most befitting manner in which to prepare for him and our reception. Mother Mary, when waiting for the birth of our Lord, went and stayed with her cousin Elizabeth during her expectant moment (Luke 1:39, 56). Similarly, John the Baptist prepared people ready to meet the Lord (John 1:6-8) in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (40:3).

As we notice, cleanliness is important when waiting for a visitor. In this regard, we believe that our heart is the dwelling place for God, hence the space we need to tidy up for Jesus' coming. This entails making a meaningful turnaround in our spiritual life. Some might choose to go for the sacrament of reconciliation, while others might decide to make peace with people with whom they have not been on good terms, among other personal choices. This way,

we can create a welcoming environment for Jesus.

The sense of being welcoming extends to the external world, analogous to the way we invite our neighbors when a visitor is coming. Therefore, Advent could serve as a time of renewal and enlarging the family of the faithful. This entails making Christ known to those who have not yet known him, affirming those strong in faith, and encouraging those who have believed in Christ but have fallen back. It is a time to talk about Christ's birth and the importance of his coming to live with us. By its nature, Advent is a period to tell the story of Jesus.

As we prepare for the coming of Christ, I remember that he is a visitor with a difference. He does not come as the visitor my mother would be waiting for; he comes as a baby, armless and vulnerable, at the mercy of society. At this thought, my heart goes to the children of our world today. What kind of world is Jesus coming into? There is so much violence in the world nowadays. I think of the children in Gaza, Lebanon, Israel, Ukraine and Russia, among other parts of the world troubled by war and political instability. The impact of climate change is also hitting hard as we witness floods and storms disrupting the normal flow of life.

This makes it appear that baby Jesus might not find anyone home to receive him at his birth. In a way, history seems to repeat itself: "... no room in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Was this not the case over 2,000 ago? This Advent calls us to make the world a better place to live for all, especially the children, people with special needs and the economically vulnerable groups who suffer most when hardship prevails.

As Jesus comes to bring joy to the world, it dawns on me that God is inviting us to consider children in our life choices. Children represent the future; by considering their needs in all development agendas, we automatically build a good future for all.

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Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/288366.

The Camino of peace: A journey of hope amid war

BY OLGA SHAPOVAL | DEC. 6, 2024



(The banco peregrino, a bench along the Camino de Santiago, offers pilgrims a moment of rest. The yellow arrow represents hope and the determination to continue. The author, who lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, spent her annual retreat on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.)

War changes everything. It's impossible to adapt to it. Obviously, one can try to learn to live in a state of war, to stop being afraid, even while knowing that the next missile or deadly drone might hit your home or your loved ones' homes at any time. However, it is impossible to accept this. Since Feb. 24, 2022, we have been running a marathon for survival. And while two years ago there was still some hope in our hearts that this nightmare would end sooner or later, that belief has begun to weaken.

Talking to other consecrated people, I've noticed that we all share a common experience. With the onset of war, our prayers have changed, as have our relationships with God. It's as if we've grown within them, becoming more mature and adult. What once evoked surprise or emotion now barely touches our hearts. Instead, the smallest acts of human kindness, service and sacrifice become compelling evidence that God is love. We find ourselves less interested in hearing answers to questions we no longer ask; that is

why we choose annual retreats that offer more silence and focus, rather than sermons and teachings.

I live in a district of Kyiv that endures the largest number of Russian missiles and drones with explosives every night. Everything around my house is constantly on fire, buzzing and exploding. Sometimes the air raid sirens don't stop all night. In the best case, you have to hide between the walls of the corridor or bathroom, and in the worst, you spend the night in the subway. When news of the dead and wounded comes from all sides, in addition to intercessory prayer, you can't help but thank God for the gift of your own life. You begin to appreciate this life and even start to see it differently.

Perhaps the most tragic experience was when a Russian missile struck the children's hospital Okhmatdyt. It's only 500 meters from my workplace and on my way home. While hiding in the corridor, we heard explosions and the

sounds of air defense, and we read on our phones that this time the victims were sick children who, connected to IV drips and machines, were waiting for surgery.

You can't get used to something like this; it surpasses any notions of human cruelty. Yet, it raises many questions about the meaning of life and death, suffering, the world and faith in God. What struck me most was how people came from all directions to help clear the rubble, carry the wounded, and deliver drinking water and food. It was a manifestation of love and solidarity that spoke more powerfully than any sermon.

When the time came for my annual retreat, I chose an unconventional method of spiritual therapy. I needed to recover, reflect, and spend time alone with myself and God. I also wanted to pray and offer my small sacrifices in the pierced heart of Jesus, fervently asking for the war to end as soon as possible. I decided to embark on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. I planned it so that each day I could meditate on the letter of St. James, pray the rosary and participate in celebration of the Eucharist.

It wasn't easy to walk 30 kilometers (19 miles) every day, sometimes in heavy rain or, conversely, in unbearable heat. There were days when I had no dry clothes left, felt every step and I pressed on my own blisters. Yet, I thought of our soldiers who, constantly risking their lives, defend my country. They sleep in bunkers and bravely hold their positions in the cold, heat and rain. I prayed for the doctors and volunteers on the front lines, who, under fire, carry the wounded and deceased, provide medical care, deliver food, and evacuate women, children and even pets. In short, they fully embody Jesus' commandment of love. My thoughts were with those who have lost loved ones and friends to this cruel war. Their grief can never be diminished or fully understood.

While staying in albergues (hostels) I woke at the slightest sound during the first few nights. I felt as if I could hear explosions and needed to urgently seek shelter. And when planes took off from the nearby airport, I dreamed of a sky over Ukraine that would finally be clear and peaceful, free from deadly missiles and fighter jets.

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/288536.

I felt grateful when pilgrims from different countries approached me along the way to talk. They saw the blue and yellow flag on my backpack and wanted to express that they remember our pain. Their friendly smiles, warm hugs and words of support felt like messages from God: "I am here! I love you!" Each act of solidarity was like a prayer being heard. There is indeed more goodness than evil in the world, even when it sometimes feels like I am living in the very depths of hell. War is hell on earth, but it clearly highlights the light against the darkness.

I arrived in Santiago tired but very happy. According to legend, witnesses of St. James' martyrdom in the Holy Land placed his body in a boat, which sailed to the town of Padrón on the coast of Galicia, from where the relics were transferred to Santiago de Compostela.

Praying before St. James' tomb, I found myself thinking that I no longer asked for anything. Words of gratitude flowed from my heart. After all, "All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change" (James 1:17). His love is stronger than any suffering and death. And although I would soon have to return to the harshness of war, I was filled with hope that God would surely ignite His campus stellae (field of stars) over Ukraine.

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Nature and Advent

BY MAGDA BENNÁSAR | DEC. 20, 2024



Image of an Arctic Tern (Photo: Pixabay Matthias Kost)

A few days ago, I found some notes that I had taken from the newspaper La Vanguardia from 2017. I see that what I discovered in them still fascinates me as wonderful, and at the same time is unnoticed by most of us. Now, on the doorstep of Christmas, I want to share some of these quotes so that we can broaden our horizons and go beyond human vision, since it is the entire Universe that is continually being born and reborn, and the Spirit of God is also in all of this.

"... the Arctic Tern is capable of traveling 90,000 km and spending 273 days away from its colonies, and despite being thousands of kilometers from home, always finding its way back. A human that loses sight of their goal is not capable of maintaining a steady course for more than eight seconds."

"Inuit peoples who inhabit the Arctic regions, establish landmarks on the earth to orient themselves, and they compose songs that allow them to remember the landscape. As they sing, the lyrics draw the path in their minds."

"Swifts do not need to rest, and they can spend up to ten months in the air feeding on whatever the wind brings

them."

"The American nutcracker hides seeds in places scattered over an area of about 260 km² to survive the winter. A single bird can hide more than 30,000 seeds in about 6,000 different hiding places."

"Each stream has a particular bouquet of fragrances that leaves an imprint on salmon before they migrate to the ocean, which they later use as a signal to identify their native tributary..."

I don't want to overwhelm you with more facts. I simply invite you to prayerfully read this information as the Word of God, so marvelously extended throughout the length and breadth of the planet. These days, with all the news of wars that could break out at any moment and unleash something more global, we may forget what is essential.

The beings that I have mentioned, and thousands more, know how to find their way back home. Wherever they are, whatever they go through, and whatever they experience along the way, their return is assured; it is

engraved within them. They use all their senses to return home. The goal is not only to return, but to live in such a way that they never forget how to return.

"I invite you to visualize your home, your dwelling, and your way back to the sacred space where 'love' is flesh of your flesh, where you gestate and give life." (Sister Magda Bennásar)

This Advent, for me, is that inner compass that reorients me toward home, toward that place of Kairos, that space-time of God.

What is home? More than walls, which may or may not exist, coming home is being in touch with your deep roots, beyond your surname and place of origin. Home is God Himself rooted in you. Return there to nourish and care for these roots because, in this home, I am free, happy, and comfortable in all dimensions of life: physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Returning home is knowing how to discover the little seeds, the songs, the winds, the scents, and the colors that, when perceived, you know speak of your path, of what is yours. You know that, thanks to all of this, you are who you are, and you are at home, and you know how to return to it. This home is your life, your "vida," and you design it, build it, repair it, decorate it, and remove alarms and locks to transform it into a dwelling place of welcome in your desert, and in the deserts of so many other people in inhospitable places.

Your home is your nest, your space, the place where you gather those you love, those you care for, heal, and pamper. In the same way, this place pampers, cares for and heals you, wherever you are.

I invite you to visualize your home, your dwelling place, and your path back to that sacred space, where "love" is flesh of your flesh, where you gestate and give life.

And don't forget the flowers that color absolutely everything, nor the smell of bread in your oven, nor to invite those who you miss. Perhaps some are no longer with us. Invite them to your home and tell them what you didn't say to them enough times. This is called hospitality towards

yourself.

During these weeks, many of us will be looking with expectation to an experience of a more authentic Christmas, one that penetrates the social fabric with its songs of peace, and long nights of darkness summoning us to stay home, where we invite, welcome, and listen to others.

Remember: our home never collapses, only when we stop living in it. This is what the mystics teach us. Wisdom from centuries, wisdom from the planet, reveals to us that we are displaced, and forces us to return home. Insects, birds, Inuit and Eskimos, do the same, finding their way with songs, seeds, time to be with family, to cook, to pray, and to talk. If we turn off all our devices, we will find some time to simply "be."

We must also give ourselves time, with intuitive intelligence, to ask ourselves if something is troubling us: "Am I not comfortable at home?" If you can't find that space, follow the restless sensation, follow the trail of sadness, the path of longing. Bring what is disturbing you out into the sun, into the light; look at it slowly; face it. Name it and follow the path back home.

On the way back, gather the seeds, open yourself to the winds that nourish you and, like the salmon, remember the imprint left by your native stream. Welcome that moment of return as a blessing. You decide the path back.

Translated by: Sister Mary Rose Kocab, oviss

[Maria Magdalena Bennásar (Magda) of the Sisters for Christian Community is from Spain. Studies in theology gave her a foundation for the charism of prayer and ministry of the word with an emphasis on spirituality and Scripture: teaching, conducting retreats and workshops, creating community and training lay leaders in Australia, the U.S. and Spain. Currently, she is working on eco-spirituality and searching for a space to create a center or collaborate with others.]

Do you hear what I hear?

BY JANE MARIE BRADISH | DEC. 23, 2024



"The Holy Women at the Tomb" by Dutch painter Jan Baptist Weenix (Artvee)

The Christmas song "Do You Hear What I Hear" wasn't originally written for Christmas. Rather, it was composed as a call for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the early 1960s. Growing up, without knowing the context of the song, I was fascinated by its imagery: wind, lamb, star, shepherd, song, king and sleeping child.

These days I'm more fascinated by the questions the song raises than the images it mentions. In my experience, try as we may, no one can see, hear, know or listen as suggested in the song lyrics. Seeing and hearing — while sensory — are much more than just senses. Many speak of an "inner knowing," a "gut feeling" or "reading between the lines."

At my place of ministry, I see nearly 1,000 people every day. More often than not, I see faces — that's all. I don't see what they may be carrying with them: anxiety, hurt, a special something they are celebrating, etc. I hear their greetings, but I don't hear what their whole being may be calling out for nonverbally. I will not even claim to know anything about anyone. And listening? With so much noise in our world right now — yikes! Just think of an experience you've had with customer service.

For me, all of this begs the question: How can I see, hear, know and listen? I don't care how much training and practice you have; this is tough stuff.

Seeing and hearing might be the easiest to figure out. Eye contact can reveal a lot. Someone saying "Hi" can have "sad eyes," or their tone can let you know something is up. It is easy to miss, though, as more often than not we say "Hi" as we're on the way to someone or somewhere else, and we may not even pause for a response. It wouldn't hurt to slow down or to be more attentive. Even if no further words were exchanged, a look can make a connection.

Knowing is harder. How often have you found yourself sensing or recognizing something was "off" but not able to name it? In the United States, and other places I'm sure, we live at high speed most of the time. Knowing takes time, reflection and most of all, honesty.

Listening isn't much easier. If someone is not sure what's happening with them, it's impossible to articulate it. In order to really listen, we need to put ourselves aside, and that's hard.



(Unsplash/Walter Chavez)

The world in which I live is fast-paced and loud. Connections with some meaning are rare. Seeing, hearing, knowing and listening often don't factor into the day-to-day reality. I'd love to have tips and tricks to share, but I don't. So, I took the song and my questions to prayer. Talk about a way to frustrate myself!

Prayer is all about seeing, hearing, knowing and listening. I know that — or at least I thought I did. Why was I surprised then when my prayer was restless? In my experience, prayer is a place of vulnerability. We are also vulnerable when we see, hear, know and listen on more than a surface level.

See: There is much beauty, but there is much pain as well. I enjoy all the plants and flowers in the yard, and I always wait too long to cut them back and pull them out for winter. Maybe I'm hoping the natural death cycle won't come this year. I know deep down that some of the plants and flowers won't survive. That's a hard reality to face.

Hear: Most of the news media report the hard things: war, famine, natural disasters, violence. It can become overwhelmingly negative and hopeless very quickly. You have to work to find and hear good news, and then it's usually fleeting. A long-ago local newscaster used to sign off each evening with "Better tomorrows." A current national newscaster signs off by saying, "Take care of your-

selves and each other." What wonderful reminders to keep trying no matter how discouraging things may be at the moment.

Know and listen: These require us to step aside — to get out of the way, if you will. In a world so focused on individualism and "besting" the other, a willingness to step aside is often seen as weakness. I think of the never-ending wars in the Middle East. In an obviously oversimplified statement, they are two peoples who for centuries cannot agree on anything, neither knowing nor listening to each other.

The call of the song more than 60 years ago remains the same. We need to see, hear, listen and know — not just ourselves, but especially the other.

The question that keeps coming back is: Am I willing to be vulnerable? It is a risk.

Jane Marie Bradish is a member of the School Sisters of St. Francis, an international congregation based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She grew up in a religiously mixed family, something she believes is a great blessing and helps her navigate our diverse world. Her ministry is in secondary education. Having taught mathematics, computer programming and theology, she is currently the academic programmer for a large, urban, multicultural high school. In 2016 she received the Project ADAM Karen Smith Award from Children's Hospital of Wisconsin for implementing comprehensive CPR-AED (cardiopulmonary resuscitation and automated external defibrillator) programs for the school community.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/289751.

Christmas invites us to create a little heaven here on earth

BY MUDITA MENONA SODDER | DEC. 24, 2024



A Nativity scene is displayed in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, in December 2019. (Dreamstime/Subhamay Acharyya)

What if this Christmas, we allowed ourselves to become a symphony of love, letting it transform both our lives and the world around us? Can we see this as a time to slow down, to rediscover the passions and purpose that give our lives melody and meaning? In doing so, we might find that love becomes the unifying force that shapes our lives and our world in ways we never expected.

This season presents an opportunity to follow our dreams, explore our talents, and align our actions with our core values. In doing so, we might free ourselves from the things that distract us and we might then focus on what truly matters.

Christmas invites us to think about how we can create a little heaven here on earth — by changing the way we live. What if, instead of getting caught up in the rush of life, we made room for discipline, honesty, humanity, morality and spirituality? What if we allowed these values to lift us up and join us in the cosmic symphony of love?

At the heart of the Christmas story is God's gift to us — his only Son, sent into the world to save us. The question we might ask ourselves is: Can we embrace the hope he offers us, making it real in our lives, and sharing it with others?

In today's world, where technology and consumerism dominate, it's easy to feel disconnected. With so many global challenges, we might wonder what it means to bring peace and joy to those around us. What if we took a moment this Christmas to be present with our loved ones — perhaps cooking a special meal or surprising someone with a simple act of kindness?

It's in these small, thoughtful gestures that we can embody the spirit of Christmas. We might remember the Kris Kringle tradition and reflect on who our "secret Santa" might be. Maybe it's a lonely neighbor, or someone who could use a little extra love and attention.

I recall a Christmas many years ago when, instead

of visiting my family, I spent the day with an elderly widow who had just lost her husband. Her daughter, who had come from America for the funeral, couldn't stay for Christmas. This widow and her husband were both converts to Catholicism. Spending time with her, and listening to the story of their conversion, and the many happy memories of their married life together, gave me immense joy.

For her, it was a catharsis — an opportunity to share her grief and her gratitude. For me, it was a reminder of what love really looks like: not as an abstract ideal, but as something lived out in the quiet, intimate moments we share with others.

This Christmas, as we reflect on the power of giving, we might find that the victory of good over evil, the beauty of joy over listlessness, and the power of light over darkness are not distant ideals but realities we can embrace in our everyday lives.

By adopting a "less is more" mindset, and fostering deeper connections, we can awaken to the truth that all is one. The divine plan for humanity is one of fraternity, of recognizing that we are all bound together as God's creatures.

Jesus inaugurated a kingdom that is still unfolding. Wouldn't it be great if we worked toward its realization this Christmas? Helping restore the health of Earth's systems, and ensuring that everyone has what they need — both materially and spiritually — could be a meaningful way to celebrate this season. Discovering better ways to coexist, to treat our planet as a sacred sanctuary, becoming a Vasudhaiva Kutumbaka (a San-

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/289876.

skrit phrase that means the whole world is one family) would be an extraordinary way of ushering in the New Year.

As we look toward 2025, what if we all embraced the idea that the whole world is one family, woven together by threads of the same cosmic fabric? It would sure make the babe in the manger smile!

This Christmas, as we reflect on the power of giving and the beauty of "less is more," we will find deeper connections that can awaken us to the consciousness that all is one. This Christmas, let us adore the babe in the manger, celebrating the unity of existence, through our words, actions and care for one another.

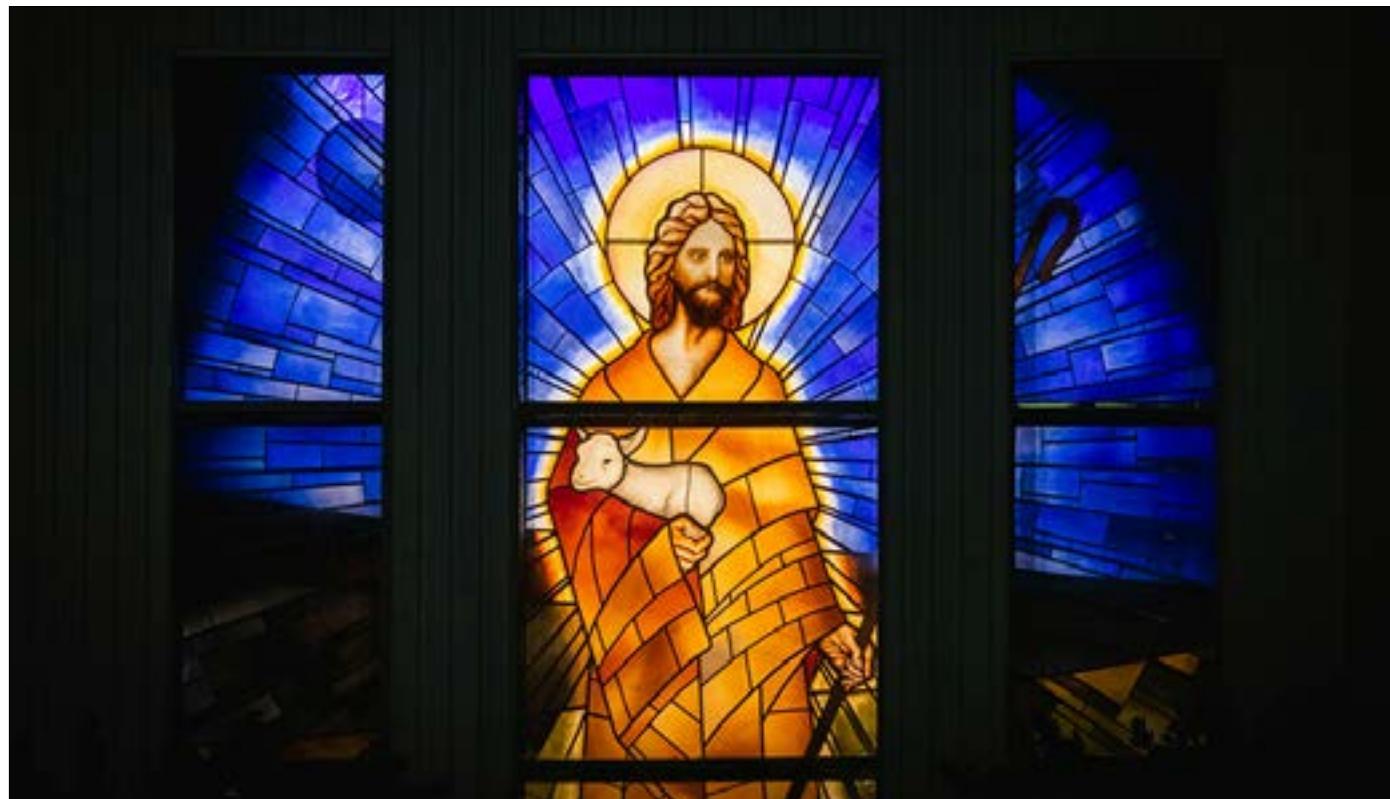
Happy Christmas and a grace-filled New Year 2025!

[Mudita Menona Sodder of Mumbai belongs to the Indian Province of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Presently the JPIC coordinator of the Indian Province for her congregation, for the past 10 years, she has been an active member of the Justice Coalition of Religious, president of Fellowship of Indian Missiologists, and has been engaged in full-time eco-spirituality work: retreats, conferences, seminars, and similar activities. Her academic background was in history, sociology, and anthropology, and she did 50 years of teaching and administration as a teacher, social worker, guide, principal, manager and adviser, with much experience in faith-based justice work and religious life.]

Christmas celebrates the Incarnation — that moment in time when the Word, God-consciousness, broke

'Kindness and truth shall meet'

BY NANCY SYLVESTER | DEC. 25, 2024



Jesus was able to embrace what seemed like contradictions and realized that all who inhabit this planet are more alike than different. (Unsplash/ Greg Rosenke)

There is always that first morning, as winter approaches here in the midwest, when the snow has lightly blanketed the earth, creating a silence that is palpable.

When it came this year, I felt such a sense of peace and expectation. I recalled a section from the Book of Wisdom which I always loved.

"When peaceful silence lay overall, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word" (18:14-15). Then an image conveyed in Psalm 85 came to mind: "Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss."

Kindness and truth shall meet. Justice and peace shall kiss. It seems a fitting image to guide us during this Christmas season.

through in the person of Jesus. Jesus embodied the fullness of divinity and humanity. He saw the wholeness of reality. He understood and experienced the joys and sufferings of life. He was able to embrace what seemed like contradictions and realized that all who inhabit this planet are more alike than different. The Incarnation reveals to us that, as children of God, we, too, have the potential to access our God-self and continue to live the Incarnation in our world today.

What might it look like if kindness and truth met, and justice and peace kissed in our lives and in our world?

I love the image that conjures up for me: two values that can be understood differently, which could be seen in opposition, engage with each other in a new way. They meet. They kiss. They now influence each other, creating something new.

Kindness and truth shall meet. Kindness is described as the quality of being friendly, generous and consider-



Let us commit to creating a future in which kindness and truth meet and justice and peace kiss. (Unsplash/Ditto Bowo)

ate. Truth is the actual state of a matter; conformity with fact or reality; a verified or indisputable fact.

In our world today, truth is difficult to ascertain. Each person sees reality through their own lens of values, assumptions and worldviews, and believes it is true. What is not my position is seen as fake news. Different narratives swirl around each other — whether the 2020 election was legitimate or not. No amount of evidence showing that the election was not tampered with can persuade those who believe it was. And to show how hard it is to see the truth on the other side, I'm having trouble trying to name the narrative that those who believe differently than me would call fake news.

What might it look like if kindness and truth met?

Might they be in a dance, leading and following at different times? No longer opposites but necessary parts of a whole. Can we hold our truth and still be generous in our willingness to listen to another person's truth? Can we soften our desire to prove we're right? Can we open up the space within us to be generous in trying to understand the perspective of the other? Can we offer our truth in ways that don't judge but invite questioning and searching? Can we change our mind?

Justice and peace shall kiss. Justice has many interpretations, but basically describes a concept that individuals are to be treated in a manner that is equitable and fair. Peace is similar in so far as it, too, is understood in a variety of ways, referring to individuals feeling secure and harmonious as well as to communities and countries being free

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from civil disturbance or hostilities.

What might it look like if justice and peace kissed?

Might they become partners in addressing conflicts that arise, inviting the two perspectives to come closer in negotiations? Can the violence in Gaza be resolved with Israel feeling secure and the Palestinians treated fairly and equitably? Can conflicts with police and various groups in our cities be viewed differently if both values were embodied in the final decisions? Can we be open to see whether our desire for peace or justice advocates for one of these values but not the other? How, through love, will they come close enough together to kiss?

Kindness and truth shall meet. Justice and peace shall kiss. It seems a fitting image to guide us during this Christmas season as family and friends gather, some for the first time since the election. The reality of our times is asking us to consciously choose who we want to be and how we want to interact with each other. How we live will create the future we are moving toward in this critical time.

Let us celebrate Christmas this year by taking time to sit in the silence, opening our hearts in contemplative prayer "to take a long, loving look at the real" and awaken to our innermost being. Let us become aware of how our speech and our actions can better reflect how we are connected and that we are more alike than different. Let us commit to creating a future in which kindness and truth meet and justice and peace kiss.

Let that be our gift to each other and our world this Christmas Day!

[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. Her new book, Journey-Faith in an Entangled World is now available.]

The Incarnation lives in the people of Syria and Lebanon

BY MONIQUE TARABEH | DEC. 27, 2024



The Orthodox Holy Cross Church is seen in the view from the family house of Monique Tarabeh in Syria. (Monique Tarabeh)

It was a quiet morning. As I walked through the chapel, the soft rays of the rising sun illuminated the altar, casting long shadows on the floor. The stillness of the space invited me to linger in prayerful reflection. I had just finished my morning prayers and found myself contemplating the profound mystery of the Incarnation — a moment in history that forever changed the world. Yet, as I sat there, a question stirred within me: How often do I truly live the Incarnation in my daily life?

As I reflected, memories of my childhood in Syria came flooding back. Growing up in the Middle East — the very region where Jesus was born — Christmas always held a special significance. I remember the joy of midnight Mass, walking through streets adorned with lights and decorations, the sound of Christmas music filling the air, and the laughter of children posing with Santa Claus on every corner. These simple yet profound moments remain etched in my heart.

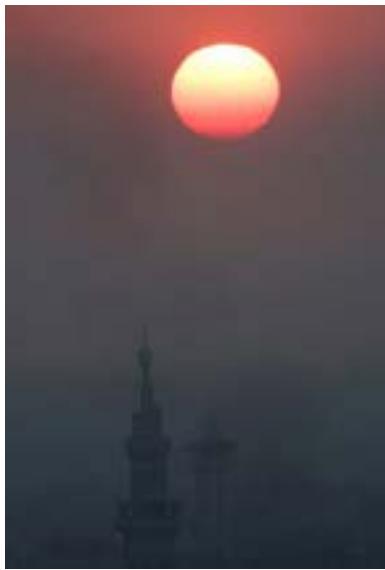
I now wonder how Christmas feels today for those still living in Syria, for my loved ones, and for countless families whose lives are marked by fear and uncertainty. How does one celebrate when stepping outside might feel unsafe?

How does one find joy when their home has been reduced to rubble? For many, the streets that once echoed with festive music now resound with silence — or worse, the distant noise of conflict. And yet, the resilience of those who continue to celebrate in small, meaningful ways reminds me that the spirit of Christmas cannot be extinguished.

It is in these reflections that I am reminded of the true nature of the Incarnation — the moment Jesus took flesh and entered our world. It is not merely a past event confined to the annals of history. It is a living, breathing reality, an ongoing invitation to embody God's presence in our actions, choices and relationships.

This profound mystery is not meant to be fully understood by the intellect but rather absorbed into the heart and expressed in the way we live. It reveals both the nature of God, who chose to share fully in our human experience, and the sacredness of every human person. By choosing to enter our joys and struggles, our sorrows and triumphs, God invites us to make his presence tangible through our love and compassion.

I recall my early years in Lebanon, where my journey as a



The sun rises over Damascus, the morning after rebels seized the capital and ousted President Bashar Assad, in Syria, on Dec. 9, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Abdallah Dalsh)

religious sister began. We, as sisters, would gather children and their families for Christmas celebrations. We organized simple parties, shared gifts, and created moments of joy for those in need. That work continues to this day, with our sisters tirelessly bringing glimpses of Christmas into homes weighed down by struggle and uncertainty. For me, this has always been a living expression of the Incarnation: God's love becoming present in the small acts of kindness that make the invisible visible.

As a Good Shepherd Sister, the writings and wisdom of St. John Eudes and St. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier deeply shape my understanding of the Incarnation. St. John Eudes, our spiritual father, reminds me that the Incarnation is not just a historical memory to be celebrated once a year; it is a dynamic reality that calls us to allow Christ to take flesh in our hearts and actions.

St. Mary Euphrasia, our foundress, saw waiting not as an empty pause but as a space where God's grace unfolds, where trust in his timing transforms our lives. Her words guide me daily, helping me approach challenges with faith that even in moments of uncertainty, Christ is with us, working quietly in the background.

The Gospel echoes these truths in its account of Jesus' birth: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This verse is more than a statement of what happened in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago. It is a proclamation of what continues to happen today in every heart open to God's

transformative love.

Amid the hardship and waiting faced by so many in Syria and Lebanon, I see the Incarnation alive in the resilience of the people. I see it in the sisters who continue their ministries despite obstacles, in families who manage to find moments of joy even in adversity, and in every small act of love that lights up the darkness. These quiet expressions of hope and faith remind me that Christ's presence remains with us, even in the most challenging times.

This year, as I reflect on Christmas, I realize anew that the Incarnation is not a passive event. It is a living invitation — a call to embody God's love in our everyday lives. To live the Incarnation is to make space for Christ in our hearts, to let him transform how we love, serve and bear witness to his presence in the world.

Often, it is in the smallest, quietest acts of service and moments of waiting that we encounter the profound reality of the Incarnation. Just as Christ entered the world in the stillness of night, He continues to enter our lives in the silent spaces of prayer, in the warmth of community, and in our compassionate outreach to others.

As the saying goes, "Be faithful in the little things, for in them lies your strength." It is often in these small, seemingly insignificant moments that we live out the Incarnation, making Christ present in the world through our love and actions.

As I think of my loved ones in the Middle East and the many people across the world who suffer, I am reminded that love is born not in noise or grandeur but in silence and humility. A silent Christmas is not devoid of celebration—it is filled with hope. It is a quiet yet powerful reminder that God is with us, transforming pain into peace and despair into hope.

May this Christmas remind us all to live the Incarnation, to become vessels of God's love, and to allow His presence to shine through our daily lives. In the silence of this holy season, may love be born anew in our hearts, and may we reflect that love to a world longing for hope. For in the mystery of the Incarnation, we find not only the heart of God but also the true meaning of our own humanity.

[Monique Tarabeh is a member of the congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd. Born in Damascus, Syria, Monique currently resides in St. Louis. She served in Lebanon for 10 years as director of an intercultural group home for girls and was a member of the province's formation team for six years. Monique holds a Master of Arts in graphic design and communication, which led her to serve as communications director for her congregation. She was also appointed as president of Multimedia International in Rome.]

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