

Whispers of Hope

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

Advent is described as a period of waiting and preparation. Laments are often voiced that this special time of the liturgical year – the new year – too often can be overshadowed by the busy-ness and noise of Christmas. That is one reason why we at Global Sisters Report have issued e-books to accompany our readers during Advent in recent years, to thank you for your loyalty and provide an extra resource for reflection.

Last year, Advent was observed amid the throes of the darkness of the coronavirus pandemic. We had just glimmers of hope that this foe that had caused such grief and loss, such physical, emotional and spiritual pain and economic disruption, might come under some control. Last year we chose for our Advent e-book some special columns by sisters written throughout the year to offer us “Moments of Grace” in such a difficult time.

This year, we enter Advent still in the midst of a pandemic – yet with some cautious signs that vaccines and treatments are making a difference even with the more virulent delta variant that appeared a few months ago. It’s telling that several columns published last year during Advent – not included in last year’s e-book – have themes and messages that resonate in this liminal time. So we are pleased to provide you with this special e-book – Whispers of Hope – that we think will give you some additional spiritual sustenance in this special season.

As Sr. Christine Schenk writes: “We hope despite the darkness. We hope, not because we can see light, but because we trust in another to be light for us. That other is Jesus.” May your trust in Jesus as light for our troubled world be rekindled and grow in this Advent time.

Yours in kindness and grace,

Gail DeGeorge
Editor, Global Sisters Report
– on behalf of all of us at Global Sisters Report

Hope in hard times is an element of our prophetic vocation

BY JULIA WALSH | NOV. 20, 2020



(Unsplash/Faris Mohammed)

I've been catching myself singing and there's a surprising theme to the songs.

Considering the state of things, there's a lot of reasons why silence might make more sense, why a somber state might be more appropriate than song. In recent weeks, the COVID-19 crisis has become so deadly that morgues cannot keep up. It remains uncertain whether there will be a smooth transition of political power after the recent election in the United States. Every day, my heart is heavy with grief and concern, as I pray for someone else who is experiencing homelessness or is unemployed, imprisoned, sick, dying or now deceased. Plus, I continue to be challenged by the ongoing need for reconstruction, for the building of a society not based on the evils of systemic racism and environmental degradation; it's big, overdue work.

I feel helpless and lost, I am not sure how to help. It's a lot, and I am discouraged and overwhelmed.

Yet, I am singing. When I am out on walks and washing the dishes, I am humming. When I pause in prayer, lyrics come to the front of my mind. It took me a while

to notice that the songs had something in common, but now I know: I am singing Advent songs.

It's technically offseason, I know, but Advent music makes complete sense. The sacred season of Advent acknowledges the darkness and suffering. It is a season of naming our longings, a time to lean more deeply into our trust in God, into the promises of our faith. God knows about hardship. God has helped humanity through hard times before. Advent is all about remembering, groaning and naming our dreams.

Most importantly Advent is about hope — fierce hope. It's a joyful counting-down-the-days hope; it's party preparation and excited anticipation. We know that God's goodness always gets to have the last word, so we get ready to celebrate. Like Easter, Advent expresses total confidence in God's goodness based on experience. And yet Advent is not insensitive to the realities of hardships and suffering. The hope of Advent simply insists that God's goodness gives us the equipment needed for the ongoing struggle. Christian hope is powerful.

Still, hope may be the hardest Christian virtue to cultivate, especially during hard times. The other day I spoke to a friend on the phone. She was heartsick and crying, discouraged and overwhelmed because of the pandemic. She admitted it was really hard for her to feel hopeful, that she wasn't sure she had any hope. She also told me that she hasn't heard anyone talking about hope, that she hasn't read anything about how to have hope.

I was surprised, because in my circles, hope seems to be thick. A few weeks ago I attended a virtual fundraiser called Keep Hope Alive. The theme of the recent National Religious Vocation Conference convocation was "2020 Vision: Focus on Hope." In my own prayer life, I have felt an emergence of refreshed hope and imagination arrive, along with a tender excitement; I am often wondering what good things God is doing, much more than I am grieving or scared.

On the other hand, it makes complete sense that hopeful conversation and energy is abundant in my circles: I am a Franciscan Sister, a Catholic sister, a woman religious. Those of us who have professed the vows of consecrated celibacy, poverty and obedience proclaim hope by our lifestyle. We have chosen to be prophetic in our hope, to point out promise and realities beyond what everyone can see.

Our vows have formed us into countercultural disciples. Hope is the foundation and fuel of this life. As people of prayer and service, we willingly go into dire circumstances and insist that God's goodness will be triumphant — all situations have potential. It may seem foolish, but that's the point. The hope we have is for realities beyond what may be obvious to others. We don't give up on anyone or any situation. We insist that evil never gets to have the last word. Our actions, attitudes and prayer life anticipate the arrival of the reign of God.

When I was younger, hope was like a synonym for optimism, a cheery sentiment that became Pollyanna in the midst of hardship. Everything will be better! Upbeat attitudes became equated with a false notion that I was entitled to endless joy. This was the "Field of Dreams" mentality ("If you build it, he will come") that knew nothing

about tough times or eternal truths. True hope, though, is totally different.

In her essay "Rediscovering Hope," Dominican Sr. Michaela Martinez expounds on how St. Thomas Aquinas defined hope in the Summa Theologica: "First, hope is triggered by a future good — a good not yet obtained. Second, by a possible good — a good that can be obtained. Third, by a difficult good — a good that, while possible, can only be obtained through difficulty."

In other words, hope needs difficulties to exist, to be pointed toward the future. In each hard moment, the struggle is the energy of hope.

Speaking of the present moment, for contemplative Christians there is a tension between the ever-constant and all-holy now and the promise of the future. Hope is the bridge in this tension. The prophetic hope of our vocation is the stuff of heaven: hope is the energy of now and not yet. In prayer and discipleship, hope hallows the heartache and activates a sacred imagination. We're here and it is hard but it is holy, and we are heading somewhere mysterious and it is holy too.

Yet, we are faced with a dilemma, a challenge: How do we proclaim hope to those who are plagued by fear, grief and discouragement? What message do we have for people like my friend, crying on the phone, and feeling hopeless?

I wonder if there's a way we can groan in the hardship while we point to the goodness of God, to the promises of eternity. I am not exactly sure how, but I think Advent songs might help.

[Sr. Julia Walsh, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, is a retreat director, speaker, educator, activist and award-winning writer who blogs at MessyJesus-Business.com. Follow her on Twitter: @juliafspa.]

Comfort and joy: Engaging Advent in the Christmas rush

BY COLLEEN GIBSON | NOV. 29, 2019



(Unsplash/Waldemar Brandt)

Months ago, my 7-year-old nephew told me what he wanted for Christmas. “Christmas is a long way off,” I tried to explain, but to no avail. The prospect of gifts grabbed his imagination and took hold.

Advent hadn’t even started, and it was hard for him to believe that it wasn’t Christmas yet. I don’t blame him. After all, over the last few weeks, I’ve seen pictures of friends beside their Christmas trees and been bombarded with advertisements that are clearly telling me I’m behind the curve on decorating.

My heart aches for the simple sound of “Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel” and yet “Do You Hear What I Hear?” echoes in my ears. Advent, it seems, has taken a backseat to the hubbub of Christmas.

Traditionally, Advent is the peaceful beginning to our year. It is a time of preparation. It is a season filled with hope and promise; a liturgical invitation to four weeks of joyful journeying in anticipation of Christ’s coming into the world — past, present, and future.

Yet, over the last few years and decades, the expectation of the season seems to have been transformed from that of expectant waiting for Christ’s coming to a frenzied flurry of preparations for a season of parties and holiday cheer. Advent has unceremoniously and inadvertently become a final countdown to December 25. Filled with Christmas carols that began playing long before our Advent wreaths were unboxed and lights that have been on houses since the end of October, Advent is a season in need of revival.

The expectation of what is to come is a gift. If we choose to engage this time of waiting, Advent has the power to deepen our celebration, enlivening the joy that makes itself manifest in myriad manner of decorations and celebrations these days. This joy is contagious. In the midst of dark days, physically and societally, people long to embrace and embody it. That desire is so deep that anything will do.

Recently, a friend lamented that all she wanted to

do after a long day was go home, put on Christmas music, and maybe bake some cookies or watch a Hallmark movie. The shifting light of winter days, drastically emphasized by the end of Daylight Saving Time in our country, called for the spark of joy and creature comforts contained in those well-worn traditions.

"It's a great distraction" she said with a grin, "No news, no nonsense, just a chance to get lost for a little while ... to escape from the worries of the world."

I can understand her sentiment. I think we all can. The impeachment hearings alone make me wonder where the closest cup of cocoa is.

The joy, however, that Advent brings isn't a cheap kind of escapism. Nor is it a distraction from the realities of the world. Rather, it is the joy that comes from encountering Goodness, the peace and respite found in attentively engaging our world as a gift from God, even in the midst of what is troubling and what demands us to be attentive with action.

We spend this season making space for joy — that is, the peaceful, triumphant birth of the Divine in our midst. The new space that we are making requires intention. It isn't meant to be filled with preparations that raise our anxiety and stress; it's about embodying all the graces that come from expectation. It is about making room for the simple joys, the graces of God. These are the true gifts of this season: hope at the fulfillment of God's faith-filled promises, joy at encountering Love in the people and circumstance of our lives, and comfort that comes from (and contributes to) the peace of God's presence and the faithful witnessing to and engagement in Jesus's coming, yesterday, today, and always.

The joy of this season also calls for serious action. As we engage the gifts that spark joy, we recognize the need to bring joy to our advocacy. Our preparations are

not just for Christmas day but so that all might know and experience the grace of God and the coming of the Kingdom in the here and now. Just as John the Baptist heralded the coming of Christ, our living out of our faith should speak to the One we are preparing the way for. With joy we work these Advent days especially so that Jesus might find a place of welcome in our world as we welcome and care for our neighbors and all of creation.

While Christmas permeates the collective consciousness, it will do us good to pause for Advent moments along the way. These moments of recollection give light to the darkness, revealing the reason for the season. We don't rejoice simply for the sake of good cheer and blessed company; we abide in the profound joy of being companioned by Jesus as he is born anew in our lives.

Such assurance is a blessing that brings with it comfort and joy. It is more than any gift we could give or any party we could plan, it is the grace of Advent, a gift freely given if we are free and attentive enough to receive it. May we pause with purpose in these days, making space for Goodness in our midst, and answering the invitation of our God to be open to the gift that keeps on giving, to the One who dwells in the giftedness of all — Christmas, Advent, and all together — ordinary times.

[A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Colleen Gibson is the author of the blog Wandering in Wonder and has been published work in various periodicals including America, Commonweal and Give Us This Day. She currently serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/185937.

'O' antiphons: We hope despite the darkness

BY CHRISTINE SCHENK | DEC. 12, 2020

I love Advent. It brings a special brand of hope and light to the darkest days of our calendar year. This sacred season of waiting and expectation is especially poignant now as our world holds its collective breath wondering if joy is even possible amid pandemic pain.

But that is the whole point of Advent. We hope despite the darkness. We hope, not because we can see light, but because we trust in another to be light for us.

That other is Jesus.

On Dec. 17, the church's liturgy begins the "O" antiphons which are ancient refrains dating to the eighth century. Each day until Dec. 23, a different "O" antiphon is sung at Mass and in the church's Evening Prayer. The antiphons weave biblical imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures into a lovely theological tapestry celebrating the messianic titles of Jesus and what they might mean — yesterday, today and tomorrow.

These messianic titles are respectively, O Sapientia (O Wisdom), O Adonai (O Lord/Leader), O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse), O Clavis David (O Key of David), O Oriens (O Radiant Dawn/Dayspring), O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations), O Emmanuel (O God-With-Us).

Several years ago, I reflected on the "O" antiphons and composed a prayer-poem (below) about what they might mean. For me, the coming of Jesus brings hope, comfort, light and a peace that truly does "surpass all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

I invite you to take time to reflect on what the coming of Jesus might mean for you.

O Wisdom,
Sophia's child,
and Mary's too,
bring us back to you.

O Adonai,
set us free
of fear, despair,
misogyny.

O Justice Flower,
of Jesse tree,
uproot our hatreds.
Wash us clean

in just-reign waters,
plant us deep in Thee.

O Key of David,
open heaven's gate
unlock, unblock,
a captive people
too long enthralled
by hate.

O Radiant Dawn,
light the way
of all who long
to preach, to teach,
to consecrate
heavenly hosts
of God's indwelling.

O Emmanuel,
strengthen weary arms,
steady trembling knees
bring surcease of sorrow.

O Advent Light,
dispel death's dark shadow.
Awaken a waiting world
to life's fresh-blessed tomorrow.

For more on the "O" antiphons and to read the original, [click here](#). Also, several years ago, the composer Joseph Gregorio set my prayer-poem to music. If you would like to listen, "Advent Reflections" is available online.

*[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch. Her recent book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, was awarded first place in the history category by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]*

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/194508.

How do I respond in faith?

BY JANE MARIE BRADISH | DEC. 15, 2020



(Pixabay/Pavlofox)

The rule and constitution of my community is titled “Response in Faith.” My copy is well-worn. Wax spilled on it when I received it — along with a candle — at my reception into community. My copy is very much a living document, filled with highlights and scribbles in the margins and little notes tucked inside. I tease that upon my death it gets destroyed so as not to cause scandal.

As I’m sure happens in all congregations, from time to time our elected leadership teams ask us to pray and study the rule anew. And while I pray with and study our rule on a regular basis, this time was very different! Without realizing it, I changed the title from “Response in Faith” to “Respond in Faith.”

For the first time, “response” seemed past tense to me, whereas “respond” is present. The world seems to be way more complicated than it has ever been. The longer I live, the broader my perspective becomes, the more I live into community, and as I continue to minister to and with a diverse group of teenagers, the more I know I need to consciously and consistently respond in faith.

I’m not talking about “big stuff” or life-changing decisions — those seem obvious for responding out of

faith and prayer and discernment. I’m talking about the everyday stuff, the routine, the automatic. You know, the stuff we do without thinking.

And so, an ever-growing litany (developed in half an hour’s time) began, “How do I respond in faith?” It is the question I keep before me and bring to prayer.

- When I reach out and people don’t reciprocate — how do I respond in faith?
- When someone I’d rather not “deal with” reaches out to me — how do I respond in faith?
- When responsibilities change after I’ve committed to them — how do I respond in faith?
- When I’m forgotten or ignored — how do I respond in faith?
- When my feelings are hurt, or when I hurt others — how do I respond in faith?
- When promises are broken — how do I respond in faith?
- When misunderstandings happen — how do I respond in faith?
- When I offer my gifts and have them rejected — how do I respond in faith?



Sr. Jane Marie Bradish at her reception into the School Sisters of St. Francis community (Provided photo)

- When I face the unfamiliar — how do I respond in faith?
- When I'm stretched further than I want to be — how do I respond in faith?
- When (fill in the blank) — how do I respond in faith?

It's been nearly a year and the longer I pray with my litany, the more I realize just how hard it is to respond in faith all the time. Responding in faith takes a lot of effort.

If I'm completely honest, I don't respond in faith as consistently as I would like. I have to admit I've rarely gotten through a complete day responding in faith to everything. Responding in faith means I'm conscious and attentive to what's going on, that I don't simply react. Like all of humanity, I want my own way, I want to

be recognized, I want what's comfortable and reliable, I lose patience.

Rather than giving up, I keep working at it. I keep coming back to my litany, focusing on one or two pieces at a time. The 2020-21 school year is offering good practice. We have a plan for "hybrid" teaching and learning. We meet with half the students at a time and are seeing them one quarter of what we usually would.

We have got a plan for total virtual teaching and learning, because the chances of having to move to that model are high, given that our school is large and, at the time of this writing, in an area with surging COVID-19 numbers. We also have a plan for school the way we are used to, face-to-face, one we doubt we will use this school year.

Hybrid and virtual school are unfamiliar and they stretch me. I know how to teach in my classroom, when I can read the reaction of my students. It's very different to do that when I can't see them.

With the school year underway, I pray I can respond in faith when the technology fails. I pray I can respond in faith when the lessons I worked so hard to prepare don't go as planned. I pray I can respond in faith when someone inevitably skips the videos and sample work and jumps right to a terse email complaining they don't understand and I'm not teaching. I pray I can respond in faith when my "gut reaction" is to give up.

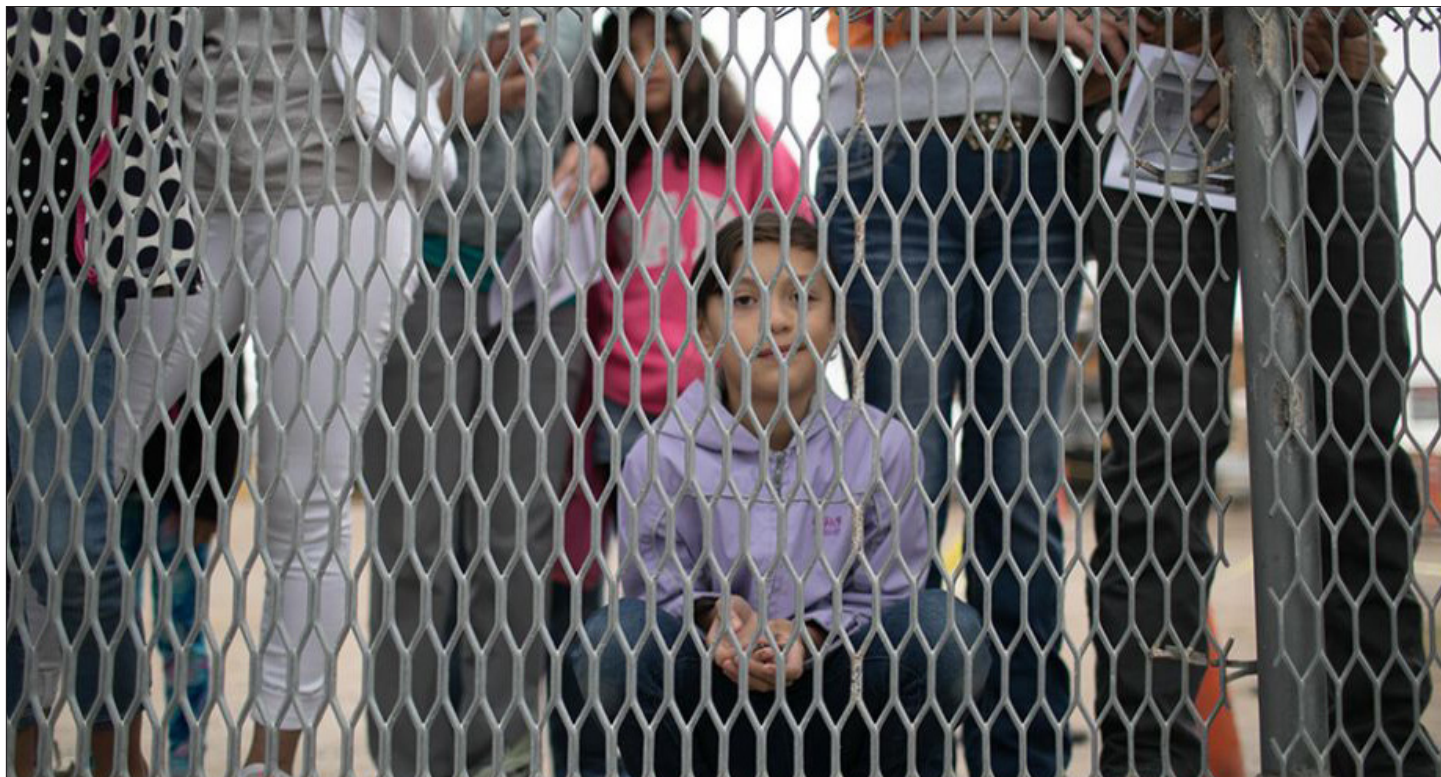
A sticky note on my classroom computer says RIF (respond in faith). I have another near the alarm clock in my room and another at the makeshift home office in the corner of the living room. Constant reminders. I don't know if my community's three foundresses could have foreseen me changing the name of our rule, but I'm almost positive they would approve.

[Jane Marie Bradish is a member of the School Sisters of St. Francis based in Milwaukee. Her ministry has been in secondary education; currently, she teaches theology and is the academic programmer for a large, urban, multicultural high school.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/194559.

Waiting that denies justice is unholy

BY TRACEY HORAN | DEC. 11, 2020



A little boy on the Mexican side of the border fence peers into in El Paso, Texas, on the U.S. side in this November 2017 photo. (CNS/Rich Kalonick, Courtesy of Catholic Extension)

Life teaches us that some things just take time. Six years into my formation as a Sister of Providence, for example, there are truths that have deepened in me about God that I simply couldn't internalize in my first year or two. After 18 years of speaking Spanish in different contexts, I have an ease in speaking that was not possible when I cracked open my first high school language books. Throughout our lives, we learn by experience the goodness of waiting that produces fruit. We learn that God's work might be slow, but it is constant.

This wholesome waiting is the kind we generally associate with Advent. It's the kind that puts butterflies in our stomach and anticipates the tastes, colors and sounds of Christmas. It's the kind that slowly melts wax on bright Advent candles and celebrates each day with the movement or opening of an Advent calendar.

The stereotypical Advent waiting is the stuff of cookies baking while their smells waft through the house, and scarves taking shape with each knitted row.

Embarking on the journey of Advent this year, songs and reflections tug me along toward this idyllic waiting. But the truth is I'm tired of waiting. And some people have been waiting for way too long.

Often in religious contexts we romanticize waiting and paint it as a saint-making practice in patience and virtue. We imagine Mary the mother of Jesus sitting quietly in her house, rubbing her pregnant belly and pondering God's plan for her, with a shiny ring of light around her head. We don't think about the morning sickness, the swollen ankles or the fatigue. Those images don't look quite as nice on Christmas cards. And yet for most of us, the waiting for post-COVID-19 life

and a new start in 2021 feels much more like the latter.

In recent years, I've done lots of wondering about how Christian leaders over time have twisted Jesus' subversive teachings into a doctrine that pacifies and subdues. Somewhere along the line, retelling tales of a man whose life inspired a revolution became a monotonous drone that puts us to sleep in cold hard pews on Sunday mornings. We sing the words of the song "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" with a gentle tune that does not match the dire plea that follows: And ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here. Are we even aware, as we sing, that this song discusses captives and exile? I can tell you that this is the first time it has dawned on me.

Sometimes in conversations with migrants waiting for asylum in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, this pacifying theology comes to light. I hear a mom renting a room without heat or furniture in freezing temperatures say things like, "Cuando Dios quiere" ("when God wills it") or "El tiempo de Dios es perfecto" ("God's time is perfect"). I sit in Zoom meetings with immigration advocates strategizing about the transition to a Biden-Harris administration in January who say that we should not expect changes to happen from one day to the next; justice will take time. Sometimes I find myself repeating them.

We are now approaching a year since the "Remain in Mexico" policy was implemented here in Nogales, and people fleeing persecution were first sent back to wait across the border from the United States. As I look around, there is nothing calm and bright about this waiting. For families running out of resources and facing the dangerous vulnerability of being a migrant in transit

at the border, this waiting is torture.

We know from history lessons that waiting can be a strategic tool of the oppressor. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King describes this tactic clearly: "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' " We must come to see, as King said in quoting an unattributed jurist, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

This year, as we wait for reparations and racial healing, COVID-19 test results, and just immigration reform, I've decided the lullaby sounds of "sleep in heavenly peace" simply do not fit the collective Advent experience of humanity in 2020. Yes, God grants us the grace to do holy things in the waiting. But the waiting itself, as long as it denies justice, is not holy.

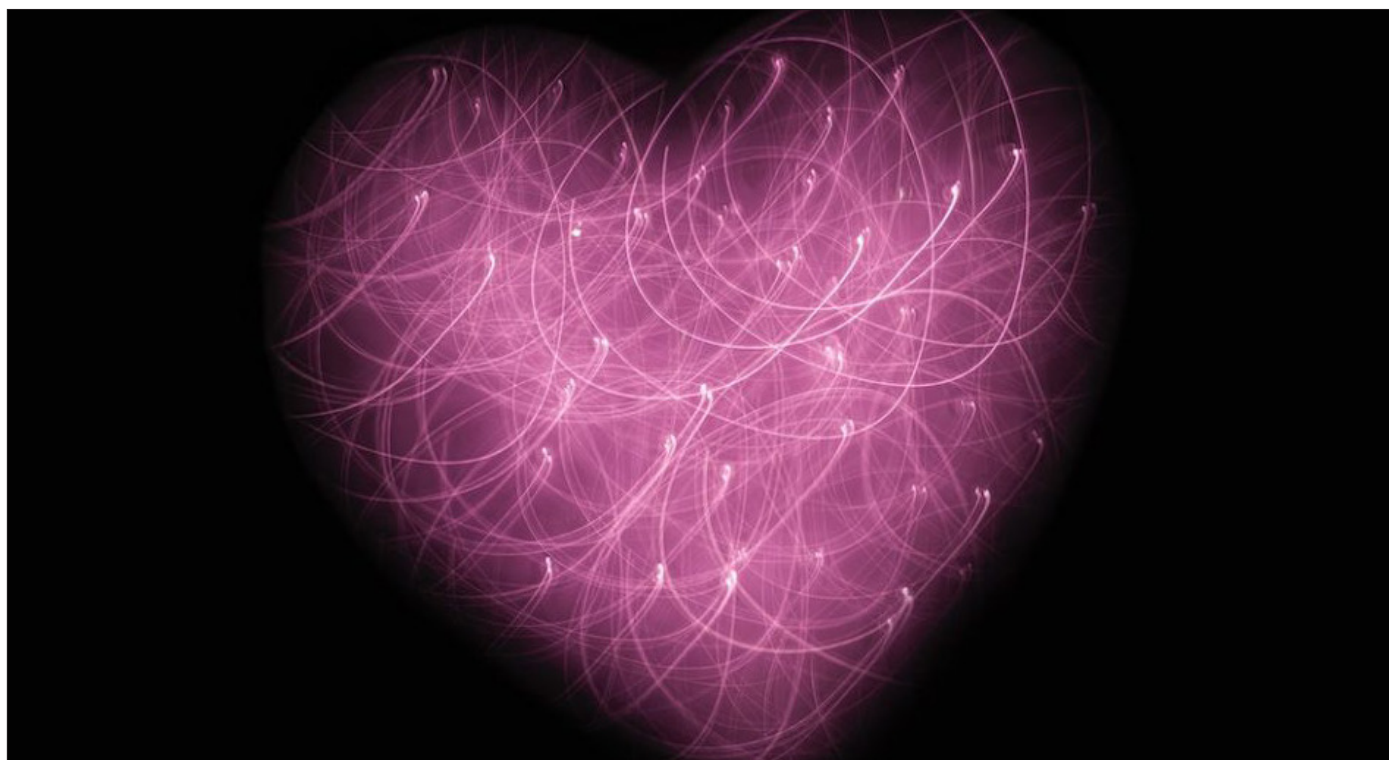
Maybe this year it's time to rewrite some tunes and paint new images of Advent waiting — images of the Holy Family unabashedly requesting the place of safe shelter that they deserve, and a door opening in response; songs that call for an end to unjust waiting. May we take up the tools to craft a new Advent interpretation, one that sounds and looks less like "Silent Night" and more like setting captives free.

[Tracey Horan is a member of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. She is the education coordinator at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona, and Sonora, Mexico.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/194483.

Gifts for this COVID Christmas — the conscious circle of humanity

BY NANCY SYLVESTER | DEC. 22, 2020



We are being asked to imagine ourselves joining hands and becoming a circle around our planet and through space and time. (Unsplash/Jude Beck)

“A COVID Christmas,” almost an oxymoron. It is hard getting your head around it. All the elements of what has become identified with Christmas, or Hannukah, or Kwanzaa — shopping endlessly for gifts, gatherings of family and friends for meals, attending crowded religious services, visiting folks you haven’t seen for a while — we are being asked to forgo for the sake of the common good.

This moment, which demands we stop doing the usual celebrations, provides an opportunity to awaken to another invitation. If we don’t stop what we always do, we may not see that which is also here waiting for us to respond.

A virus has invaded our entire planet and is threatening life. This one we call COVID-19, but it is not the only toxin that is making us sick and threatening life.

We are being invited to move beyond materiality to go more deeply into another dimension of reality, the spiritual realm, so as to continue the healing of our planet.

Quantum physics is revealing to us the many dimensions of reality and Cynthia Bourgeault in her book, *Eye of the Heart*, introduces us to the conscious circle of humanity, which has its roots in an old piece of Hassidic folklore. Both sources I draw from in this reflection.

Think of the conscious circle of humanity as a circle of protection where we draw wisdom, insight, energy and strength to rid the planet of the many toxins to which we are exposed. The virus is a physical one, but there are others that manifest in different ways: the toxins of fear, greed, violence, vengeance and shame.

Bourgeault writes of these toxins that threaten life. “Entitlement, indifference, group-think, mass hysteria, addiction, violence, even the isolation and suspicion that hang like a heavy pall over affluent, gated communities — all these create serious toxicity, real imaginal pollution, which rains back down on our planet in the contagion of cancers and autoimmune diseases.”

The conscious circle of humanity’s task is to rid our



Picture yourself joined with others who have also received their gift. Hands opened in a posture of embrace, empty your mind and simply sit and in contemplative silence surrender to Divine Energy pulsing in you and throughout reality. (Pixabay/Clker Free Vector Images)

planet of this smog and — like dialysis — purify a system that cannot cleanse itself.

We are being asked to imagine ourselves joining hands and becoming a circle around our planet and through space and time. Conscious of who we are at our best, we take part in a mutual exchange of wisdom and protection, making course corrections when necessary. We embrace the human predicament compassionately and offer and are offered the skillful means to help.

And we do not do it alone. In the Catholic tradition, we join with the communion of saints, those who have died and continue to exist in transformed ways, those named in the hymn, “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones.” Those who have died of COVID-19 and continue to live on. We circle round together committed to our human responsibilities and open to the gifts of those who now exist in a different realm continuing to serve us. Their gifts given help us do our work here in this realm.

How do we do that? Bourgeault suggests that we rebalance the toxicity “with a direct infusion of those elements which we have been referring to as ‘fruits of the spirit.’ ”

These are: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Bourgeault sees these as “powerful nutrients for all spheres of reality and in fact, in their absence human habitation quickly becomes untenable.”

Becoming part of the conscious circle of humanity and the fruits of the spirit can be the gifts we receive and

give to each other and to our planet this Christmas.

Here are some thoughts as to how to do this.

Become part of the conscious circle of humanity

Find a quiet place and, after a time of contemplative sitting, reflect on which “toxins” are most threatening for you and for our planet. Become aware of the human behaviors that contribute to that toxicity and hold them compassionately.

Write out on separate slips of paper the fruits of the spirit. Let them speak to you. Allow one to emerge that feels as if it is being given to you as a gift for today.

Imagine living out of that gift in the days, weeks and months to come. What does that look like? How would what you do and how you are lessen the smog of our toxic atmosphere?

You may want to write down your reflection so that you can remember it later.

Then picture yourself joined with others who have also received their gift. Hands opened in a posture of embrace, empty your mind and simply sit and in contemplative silence surrender to Divine Energy pulsing in you and throughout reality. After a period of time give thanks and then just be aware and awake to any insights that arise in the days to come.

You may want to share this meditation with others and to offer them this as a gift for this COVID Christmas.

Post-script: Too often we get dragged down when we look at the toxic side of humanity or the destructive power of the universe. It is important to remember that moments of chaos and crisis give birth to new possibilities. The Incarnation reminds us that God loved this planet and all of its creatures so much that divinity intermingled with humanity in a most profound way. We have that inheritance, and we are asked to fully receive it as gift. Then when we join hands in the conscious circle of humanity, we will commit to protect, uphold, and bring to completion all that has been set in motion since the beginning of time ...

[Nancy Sylvester is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue. She served in leadership of her religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, as well as in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. She was national coordinator of Network, the national Catholic social justice lobby. You may be interested in the current ICCD program, “Enter the Chaos: Engage the Differences to Make a Difference,” offered online. For information go to iccdinstitute.org.]

Bringing joy to children in Vietnam through a Christmas festival

BY MARY NGUYEN THI PHUONG LAN (NGUYEN) | DEC. 24, 2020



Children enjoy the different foods at the Christmas festival in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City. (Nguyen)

“Merry Christmas” is a greeting used by millions of people all over the world to express their desire for another person to be joyful, and have a wonderful holiday with all their family members.

Besides that, Christmas gives us a chance to show our concern and share good things with the poor, the suffering, disadvantaged children and others.

Every year on the Christmas festival, the Caritas Department of the Sai Gon Archdiocese (also known as the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City) holds a Christmas Day festival for all children at centers located in the archdiocese, including Catholic and non-Catholic children. Most of them are cared for and fed by sisters from different congregations in the archdiocese.

Every year, the Caritas Department of Sai Gon welcomes the numerous children who attend this Christmas festival — around 1,000 children or more. Most

of the children are from special circumstances. Some of them were abused by their parents (for example, splashed with boiling water) and then abandoned; others were left crying in the hospital: they have never felt the warmth and sweetness of their parents. Some have genetic diseases, and some have severe disabilities; all were nurtured by the sisters belonging to different congregations, such as the Charity Missionary Sisters, the Dominican Missionary Sisters and the Paul Sisters.

In addition to children with special circumstances, there are also adults. Some have congenital disabilities; being with the children brings them joyful smiles.

Understanding that their lives lack the love of parents and relatives, the Caritas Department of the Sai Gon Archdiocese organizes a Christmas day festival at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center, to bring happiness

and joy to these children. We hope this event gives them joyous childhood memories. As Jesus Christ lay in the poor manger, welcomed with joy by all, just so children today are shared and loved by everyone.

Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, present at a recent Christmas Day festival for children with special circumstances, encouraged them with the thought that "God is always merciful, the mystery of the Son of God was born into the world in poverty to love and share human suffering, and you are full of joy today because I feel that you are greatly loved, hoping that you become useful persons for society and church in the future."

In addition, this festival is a good chance for volunteers and parishioners of the archdiocese to share their love for less fortunate children by providing many game stalls, free souvenir stalls and cooking different dishes to serve them. One of the parishioners said, "On this occasion, I feel happy to make fried chicken for children because this is their favorite, and this dish is always out of stock first." She added, "This is also the Christmas gift that I want to send to the poor."

When I interviewed one of the kids attending the festival, he said, "I am very excited and looking forward to coming to the pastoral center to enjoy the fried chicken, play many games, get souvenirs, and watch the Christmas drama and dance — especially to play the lottery for Christmas gifts."

I asked a 16-year-old girl, one of the orphans staying with the Charity Missionary Sisters, "How do you feel about the festival Christmas day?" she said she was very grateful to the sisters for welcoming her and her young brother.

Several years ago, she and her brother had to sell lottery tickets to feed her grandmother. Her parents had died in an accident and she lived with her grandmother in a rented house. When her grandmother passed away, she was not able to pay to rent the house, and the landlord demanded his house back. Then, she and her brother had to sleep down in the sewers after a day of selling lottery tickets.

Just by chance, while selling lottery tickets in the



Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang shares some encouraging words with children at a Christmas Day festival. (Nguyen)

church yard, she met a kind parishioner. Understanding the difficulty of their lives, he took her and her brother to the Charity Missionary Sisters center on Christmas Day. The sisters welcomed them warmly and gave her and her brother Christmas gifts. This made an impression that she will never forget. Attending this Christmas day festival, she feels very happy because she is loved by many people, especially the Charity Missionary Sisters.

On behalf of the sisters who are in charge of caring of children with special circumstances, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, the Caritas Department of the Sai Gon Archdiocese, volunteers and parishioners of the archdiocese for organizing a yearly Christmas day festival for children. It is a meaningful program that shares God's love for everyone, especially the poor children. May God's love and peace be with you always. Merry Christmas!

(Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan (Nguyen) is a Dominican Missionary Sister of Phu Cuong in Vietnam.)

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