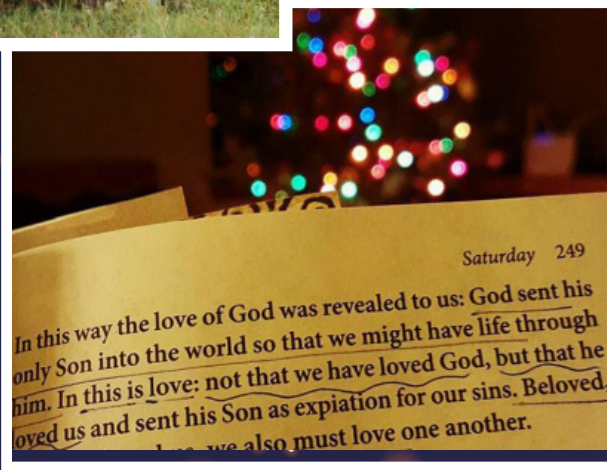
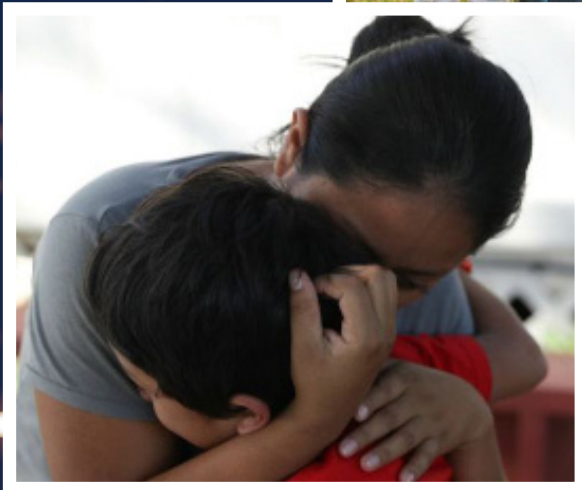


A Season of Hope

Advent and Christmas reflections
from Global Sisters Report



GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT

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Greetings from Global Sisters Report!

Thank you—and Happy New Year! Advent heralds the start of the new liturgical year, and we at Global Sisters Report, in lieu of a traditional Christmas card, want to share some of our favorite GSR columns and stories from this very special season as a gift of appreciation.

We hope you will take a few moments to read, enjoy and reflect on the offerings of this special GSR e-Book.

Look for more Advent- and Christmas-themed offerings on GlobalSistersReport.org, as well as on National Catholic Reporter at NCRonline.org.

Merry Christmas!

The gift of Advent rituals

BY LAURA HAMMEL | DEC. 17, 2018

As the Christmas holidays approach, in the northern hemisphere our side of the earth grows colder and darker. The nights grow quieter and the sun spends less time with us each day. Before our eyes, the year seems to drift into its own sleep as though making way for the New Year to be born.

As we move through this dark season, we are blessed with the gift of many important Advent and Christmas rituals that help to defeat the darkness and to keep warmth and light glowing in our souls.

We celebrate the outgoing year with family and friends. We share stories and food, trees and lights, gifts and church services. In the USA, the season of sharing begins at Thanksgiving, when we gather together to renew our gratitude for each other. December is busy with many activities. We send cards to tell family and friends our stories of the past year.

We bring an evergreen tree into our homes to remind us of life and growth when all else around us has gone dormant and is covered with snow. We decorate our trees with ornaments that carry memories of past Christmases. We string lights around our homes and trees to fill the night with light and to balance the darkness of our sleeping earth.

When days are at their coldest, we invite friends in and share our favorite foods. We turn to the warmth of companionship to ease the bitter cold. We give gifts to each other, images of something new to start the New Year. It is our faith communities that have created and nurtured many of these festivals and holidays. Celebrations such as Hanukah, Advent, Kwanzaa and Solstice bring comfort and hope to us all.

However, not all people share these joys during this time of year. Many within our communities, families and circles of friends find this season difficult — perhaps because of the loss of a loved one, difficult family relationships, economic hardship or illness.

Nevertheless, even to those facing dark times, these Christmas rituals often may provide some solace. Personally, when I am going through a difficult time, carols comfort me most, bringing back memories of past Christmases and our continued desire for peace. Those memories fill my eyes with tears.

I remember sitting with my mother during her last Christmas Eve night, after the rest of the family had gone home. The room was dark except for the tree lights and the reflection of their light on the patio windows. From



Dreamstime

the stereo came the sound of carols playing softly in the background. No words were needed between us, only silence and the comfort of warm memories of past Christmas Eves spent happily with family members no longer with us.

Advent rituals also provide joy at this cold and dark time of the year. Christmas preparations in the monastery were unique to me during my first months as a sister. We could not bring out decorations until December 24; we were committed to the four weeks of Advent as a time of waiting! It was a happy waiting, as when a new member is about to enter the community.

During Advent the songs of the Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours of our daily office were our main way to express this ancient longing, hope and expectation. Singing fed our joy in each other's abiding company as we waited together.

We did not decorate, or send out any personal Christmas cards until after December 25. But we did send at least two thousand cards during Advent to friends and supporters, whose donations were critical to our work. The cards carried our Christmas greetings as well as our gratitude for their financial support.

I was amazed at this major mailing production. These were the days before computers, and each card

Ending the year with gratitude

BY NANCY SYLVESTER | DEC. 31, 2018



The Solanus Casey Center in Detroit (the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph monastery) has a group of statues that welcome you when you come in; they represent persons who lived the Gospel. (Courtesy of the Solanus Casey Center)

This Advent I had the privilege of designing and leading a retreat day for one of our downtown parishes. The theme was “Living the Incarnation Today: the Union of the Human and the Divine.” The parishioners and others who joined us made me proud that I am a Catholic. Their diversity spoke to who we are as a church and as a country — men, women, gay, straight, single, married, religious, lay, young, old, black, white, professional, working class. Some were immigrants; others were recovering from addiction; many were retired; some were employed and others unemployed. A microcosm of the mystical body of Christ. A microcosm of our nation.

We shared how we understand Incarnation and the incredible mystery that divinity embraced humanity and that we have this divine energy, God, dwelling within us. We practiced contemplation as a significant way to deepen our interior journey so that we can know our authentic self, the self that rests in the divine embrace.

With that deepening awareness of who we really are, contemplation takes us inward in order to go

outward, enabling us to move forward together. We ended our day with how we will continue to live the Incarnation in our daily lives.

I felt so grateful for this day, for all who were gathered. This year was filled with so much sadness and so many tragedies in our church, in our nation and in our world that gratefulness seems in short supply.

And yet ... I realized there is much to be grateful for, men and women who have lived the Incarnation in ways that give us hope and that have been transformational. Some of them greeted me at the center where we were meeting. The Solanus Casey Center in Detroit (the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph monastery) has a group of statues that welcome you when you come in; they represent persons who lived the Gospel. Some may be more familiar to you than others, but they all lived out of that authentic self; they all lived out of Christ consciousness; they all had “put on the mind of Christ.”

I offer this meditation adapted from this Franciscan expression of the Beatitudes written by Capuchin Br. John Francis Samsa, “The Beatitudes of Christ: Embrace

the Challenge.” I encourage you to take some time as the old year ends and reflect on these lives as well as others for whom you are grateful. Reflect on those people or situations that gratuitously offer you hope and whose lives made our world a better place.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Theirs is the reign of God. Dorothy Day — a Catholic with communist ideals; preached socialism and women’s rights; pacifist; journalist challenging church and government policies.

Blessed are the non-violent. They will possess the Earth. Takashi Nagai — exposed to radiation from the bomb that fell on Nagasaki; preached forgiveness and reconciliation until his death; amid the destruction he spoke only of the love of Christ; spoke of disarmament as moral obligation.

Blessed are those who mourn. They will be comforted. Jean Donovan — fun loving; loyal Republican; engaged to be married; Ursuline volunteer in El Salvador; murdered for distributing clothes and food to those most in need in that war-torn country.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. They will be satisfied. Msgr. Clement Kern — Catholic priest; conscience of Detroit; opened his church to alcoholics, illegal immigrants, gays, and social protesters; supported labor unions and lived Catholic social teaching.

Blessed are the merciful. They will receive mercy. Mother Teresa — fed, clothed, cleaned and comforted the sick and dying on the streets of Calcutta (Kolkata); founded a religious community dedicated to this same work.

Blessed are the pure of heart. They will see God. Catherine de Hueck — pioneer among North American Catholic laity in implementing social doctrine; insisted

that action be rooted in prayer; advocated making faith an integral part of ordinary life; bridged Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

Blessed are the peacemakers. They will be called children of God. Martin Luther King — rooted in faith, gave hope to oppressed people; saw achieving racial equality as a duty for each person; courage to stand undefended when attacked; jailed and beaten; advocated non-violent strategies in opposing injustices.

Blessed are those who suffer persecution for justice’s sake. Theirs is the reign of heaven. Bishop Óscar Romero — priest of El Salvador; allowed himself to experience the suffering of his people and the indifference of the political leaders; spoke of a revolution of conscience, of love and justice; shot down while presiding at the Eucharist.

As this year draws to a close, let us be grateful for all those who live the Gospel. May the new year invite us to go ever deeper, encountering the divine within so that we have the courage to act out of our authentic selves. May your new year be filled with gratitude, love and outrageous acts of courage. Happy New Year!

[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.]

Read online at GlobalSistersReport.org/node/55741.

In time for Christmas: US family discovers Chinese nuns who rescued adopted baby daughter

BY MELANIE LIDMAN | DEC. 24, 2018



Teagan (Tian Xin Yue) plays at a sculpture on Shamian Island in Guangzhou, China, while her parents were finalizing some of the last adoption paperwork earlier this year. (Courtesy of the Worley family)

The morning of Dec. 2, 2016, began like any normal day for the Worley family. Robin spent the morning homeschooling her children, Heidi, 14, and twins Noah and Micah, 12. Her husband, Billy Worley, an electrical engineer, was at work.

But then a Facebook post caught Robin Worley's eye, and suddenly their Tennessee family was changed forever.

"Teagan is 4 years old, has achondroplasia, and is from China. She is one adorable, dimply, beautiful girl!" the post began. Robin Worley and all three of her children also have achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism that affects the long bones in the body. People with this type of dwarfism generally have average-sized torsos but much shorter arms and legs.

Billy Worley, Robin's husband, does not have dwarfism, but the couple's biological children had a 50 percent chance of being born with the genetic condition. And all three children inherited the dwarfism gene.

Something about the post made Robin stop short.

The family did not have plans for additional children. But an accompanying video of Teagan, who the post said was in foster care at the time, reminded Robin so much of Heidi, her eldest daughter. Both had the same mannerisms, and the video sealed the deal: Teagan belonged with them.

"We just felt like, we had a peace about it," Robin Worley recalled of seeing the Facebook post. "It wasn't something we thought about not doing. We just felt called to go get her."

When Robin showed the Facebook post to her kids, they immediately fell in love as well, yelling, "Yes! Yes! We want a sister!"

Robin sent a breathless message to her husband with the post about Teagan. By the end of the day, they had filled in the initial application for adoption, and sent the deposit to the agency within the week.

It took a year and a half of bureaucratic wrangling, but Billy and Robin adopted Teagan on March 19, 2018.

The smiling girl, now 6, blended seamlessly into the family, picking up English quickly and even start-

ing to learn to read. Today, she can count to 100 and will be singing in the church choir for Christmas. She celebrated her first Thanksgiving and is excited about the family's Advent tradition of eating a Kinder Chocolate each day of the religious season, a holdover from Robin's upbringing in Germany.

Although they were ecstatic finally to bring Teagan home, the Worleys wondered what they would be able to tell her about the first years of her life. They had very little information from the Xingtai Social Welfare Institute about Teagan's early years, except that she had been in another institution for children with disabilities. When it became clear that Teagan did not have any mental disabilities, she was moved to Xingtai, where she was eligible for adoption.

"They gave us some pictures of her, and just a few pictures of when she was 3 years old," said Robin Worley. "I kept telling Billy, 'I wish we could find something about her.'"

The family kept searching the internet for information, praying that they might be able to find additional scraps of information to tell Teagan about her life before she became part of their family.

And then, over the summer, Billy came across a Global Sisters Report article I wrote. In August 2017, GSR published a story about the St. Therese of the Child Jesus Sisters, who run the Liming (House of Dawn) Family facilities, a collection of homes and rehabilitation services for severely disabled children. The sisters are considered the forefront of treating children with disabilities in their northeastern province of Hebei, and they provide training for governmental and non-governmental institutions in China. Around the same time, the Worleys also found a documentary about the St. Therese sisters' work with children with disabilities.

Robin sent me a hopeful Facebook message in October about the article, asking for more information. I hesitated in responding. There are over a billion people in China. There are thousands of orphanages, and thousands of places for children with disabilities. What are the chances, I wondered, out of all of the orphanages in that vast country, that their daughter would be from the exact orphanage that I visited, the Biancun Nursing Center?

When I called Robin, she was cheerful, hoping that we would be able to connect the dots. I was less optimistic, but I promised to send Teagan's picture to Sr. Ma Suling, the congregation's former superior.

"I am emailing because a family in the U.S. reached out to me. They think a daughter that they adopted from China may have spent some time at Liming Family before she was adopted at age 5 in March," I wrote to Ma. "Her Chinese name is Tian Xin Yue and her birthday

is written as December 20, 2012."

Ma wrote back almost immediately. "I am glad to hear some news about Tian Xin Yue!" she said. "Yes, Tian Xin Yue is from Liming Family. I am familiar with her, she is very cute."

Robin Worley said every time she tells this story to another adoptive family, they are "blown away."

"So many people don't know their children's story," she said. "You have the government paperwork, but you really don't know."

Ma was able to provide some information about how Teagan/Tian Xin Yue came to their orphanage. She was abandoned in the winter on a wall outside the orphanage soon after birth, and was discovered after she had been outside for hours. When the sisters found her, she was blue and purple from cold and required hospitalization for a week due to pneumonia.

Ma also sent dozens of snapshots of Teagan as a baby. For the Worleys, seeing baby Teagan on a trip to the beach or the zoo or riding a bicycle with the sisters dispelled their fear that Teagan was scared or mistreated during her early years.

"You can tell that a lot of love was invested in her," said Robin Worley.

The Chinese congregation was overjoyed to see photos of Teagan in America, said Ma. "We are very happy when we see a child from Liming who has found a forever family, because we know that is good for her or him, even though we love them so much," she said by email. "We are so happy to know when a child has a good life with their adopted parents in a new family."

Only two children from Liming have been adopted internationally, though the sisters care for several children who are eligible for adoption, Ma said.

The Worleys hope to visit the St. Therese sisters in the future, though not for a few years, at least until Teagan is old enough to understand the trip, Robin Worley said.

"I don't know if it's sunk in that she'll be staying here forever, that this is her forever home," she said. "Sometimes she says, 'when we go back to China,' and we try to reassure her that this is her home."

The Worleys said the connection with the St. Therese sisters through Global Sisters Report has reinforced their belief that Teagan's arrival in their family was part of God's plan all along. During the adoption process, Teagan's arrival was delayed due to problems with her registration with the Chinese government, a common problem with orphans, who often fall through the cracks, the sisters say.

Billy Worley lost his job of 20 years during the adoption process and was still unemployed when the paperwork finally went through to finalize it. According to the adoption requirements, the family must have a

steady income.

"Billy just looked at me and said, 'OK, I guess God's going to give me a job now,'" Robin Worley recalled. Within a week, Billy had found a job at a company that had previously told him they weren't hiring.

For now, Teagan is happily enjoying life in Chattanooga, Tennessee, doted on by her older siblings, and looking forward to her first Christmas in America. "It's been awesome having a little sister — she brings a new energy to our family," said 16-year-old Heidi.

Robin Worley said it breaks her heart to think of what happens to other orphans with disabilities, especially dwarfism, who aren't adopted. There is little understanding of dwarfism in China, and sometimes children with disabilities are not allowed to attend school or kept in institutions for their entire lives. As they age, they are transferred from a children's orphanage to a nursing home.

The St. Therese sisters firmly oppose this. They provide schooling to all of the children, and have adult vocational centers for people with disabilities, including art and music classes. Members also can earn their own money by working in the congregation's secondhand store or selling crafts made by residents, such as paintings or clay cellphone charms. Some graduates from Liming Family have gone on to study at prestigious Chinese universities.

The sisters also work individually with families who have children with disabilities, providing subsidized therapy, so parents can keep their children at home in the first place. The sisters also do a lot of outreach, including talent shows featuring the residents of their homes, to educate the public about disabilities.

"We want you to know that Xing Yue is with a family that understands her condition; in fact, her dwarfism is considered 'normal' in our house," Billy Worley wrote to the sisters in the first email after I introduced them.

"Some people consider dwarfism a disability. I don't consider it a disability, I just say it's harder to reach things," said Robin Worley.

She does realize, however, that her family's unique situation puts them in the spotlight whenever they go out, whether they want it or not.

"I tell my kids, if a family of four kids who were average sized walked into Walmart, no one will remember them," she said.

"But people will remember you, and with that comes a great responsibility. You are an ambassador; God blessed you with this. People will say what they're going



The Worleys, from left, Noah, Billy, Robin, Heidi, Teagan and Micah (Courtesy of the Worley family)

to say, but they don't know you. You're an ambassador for God and for good."

Worley said people sometimes call them names or take photos without permission, which can be demeaning. But she sees it also as an opportunity to educate people about dwarfism and about people who are different.

"I find it interesting, if you see someone in a wheelchair, you wouldn't take a video of them or say something [mean] to them," she said. "I don't know if it's a holdover from Barnum & Bailey Circus. I don't know why people are ugly, why people take pictures and stare."

People also took pictures of their family in China, though the Worleys weren't sure if it was because they are white people, white people with a Chinese baby, or because Robin has dwarfism.

"I loved being [in China] with Teagan, to show the Chinese people, 'Yeah, I have dwarfism, but I'm a mom, I can drive, I can do whatever you can do,'" she said.

"These children born with dwarfism can, too. These kids are different, but that's OK, we're all different; none of us are perfect. But I can't imagine not having Teagan in my life. She has brought so much joy."

[Melanie Lidman is the former Global Sisters Report Africa/Middle East correspondent.]

Christmas is for lovers

BY TRACY KEMME | DEC. 28, 2018



Anita Areli Ramirez Mejia, an asylum seeker from Honduras, hugs her 6-year-old son, Jenri, July 13 at La Posada Providencia shelter in San Benito, Texas. The mother and son were reunited after being separated near the Mexico-U.S. border. (CNS / Reuters / Loren Elliott)

It's impossible to overemphasize the centrality of love in our beautiful tradition. The mystery of love is inexhaustible, present at the beginning when God brought forth all that is, singing in Jesus' incarnation, life, death and resurrection, pulsing through each of us as Spirit, and drawing us to a future where peace and justice will reign forever. This Christmas, I was reminded again what it's really all about: Love.

Receive

Just before Advent began, I sat in quiet prayer, asking how God wanted me to spend the sacred, often-too-short-feeling season. With thousands of options for daily Advent reflections and theme calendars floating around, I wondered: What would my practice be? How would I make space and wait? How would I grow?

In the silence, three words materialized: "Receive my love."

The simplicity surprised me.

Just receive? I thought. It seemed too good to be true. I'm not quite sure what I was expecting, but I supposed it would require more effort on my part. I was imagining active Advent verbs: make space, clear clutter, pay attention.

I waited a little longer.

Nothing else came. The tiny sentence had taken root in my heart, and I sensed that God wanted it to stay there.

Receive my love.

Three words. And a lifetime's worth of learning.

I smiled. I spend a lot of time striving. Even when I preach to others how much God loves them, sometimes a block in my heart — perhaps from past wounds or present worry — keeps me from truly believing in God's unfathomable love for me. Even though I have vowed my life to a God I know to be pure graciousness, I resisted when I sensed that this

God wanted me to simply receive love. It felt like a gift I didn't deserve. Aha! I smiled again. Of course — that's the point! That's the Judeo-Christian story. Our God is given-ness. We are each loved with a "love beyond all telling."

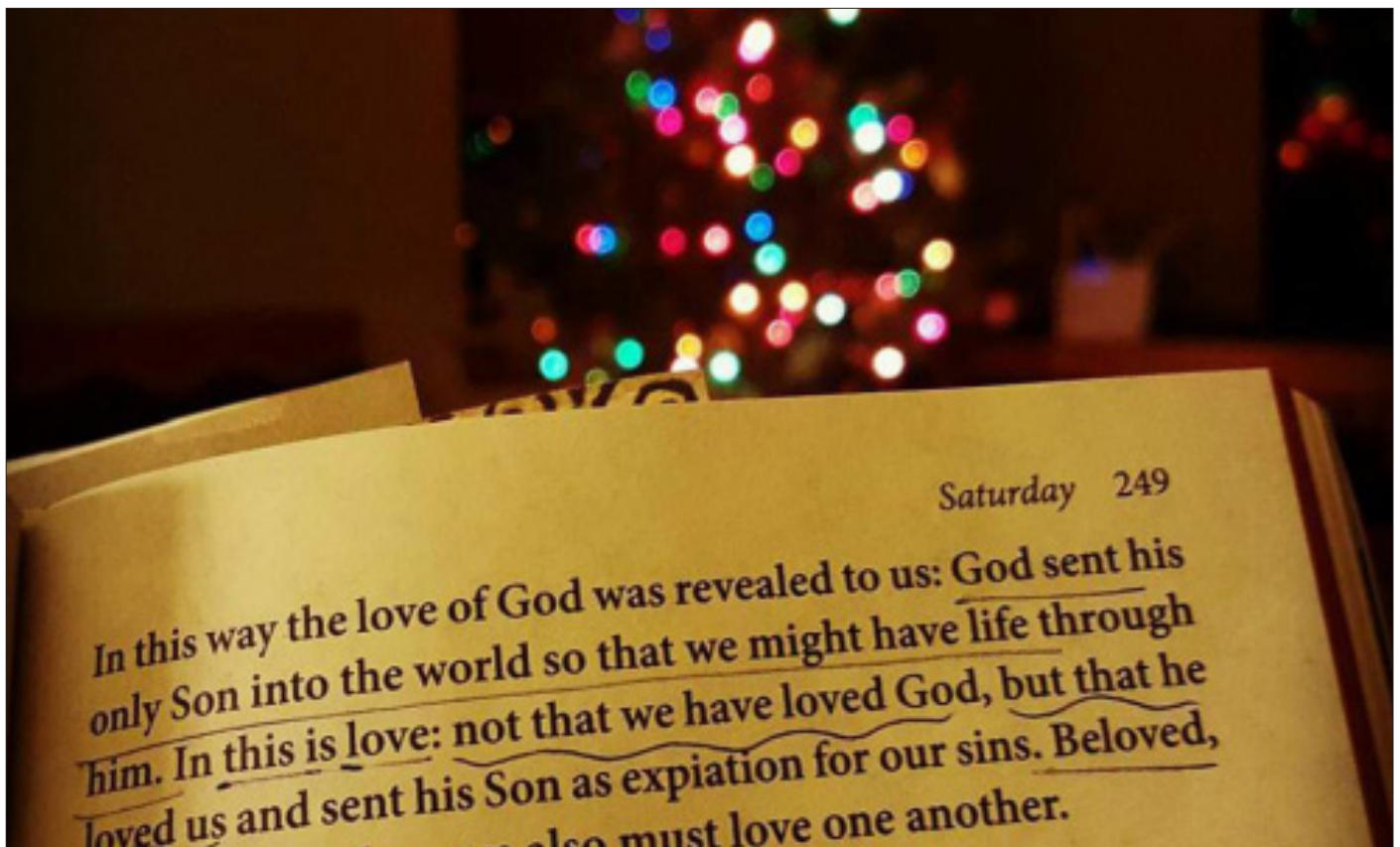
Like a good human being, I found myself complicating things throughout Advent. But whenever I most needed it, I would flip through my journal and remember God's invitation meant to frame my whole Advent journey: *Receive my love*. My being would somehow breathe a sigh of relief. I would settle into silence, palms wide open, not working or figuring out, but simply resting in God's love.

As Advent progressed, God's invitation deepened. Prayer saw the phrase expanded: *Receive my love and share it with others*. Again, I smiled at profundity revealed in simplicity. The freely offered warmth and tenderness of God naturally overflow, compelling me to reflect the same to others. Real love doesn't stay put. And it doesn't originate with us, but with the Source of everything. I think I've heard this somewhere before: Love one another as I have loved you.

Share

I'll never forget Adriana's embrace. Her arms were all the way around me, fingers practically digging into my back, head resting on my shoulder, tears moistening my jacket, most of her body weight leaning on me for support. My eyes closed in prayer as I held her. I was still, silently letting her know she could stay in my arms as long as she wanted. It was as if she'd been waiting for a hug for weeks.

Adriana left Guatemala with her two children in October, and here she was, the day before Thanksgiving, at Centro San Juan Diego shelter in El Paso, Texas, that welcomes migrants recently released from detention. Adriana and her two kids spent four days in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody after their month-long journey on foot, bus and everything in between. They had been corralled in cold rooms with little food and only an aluminum sheet for sleeping, still wearing the same outfits they had donned to depart Guatemala over a month ago. The center would give them good food, clothes, showers, and a warm place to sleep.



(Tracy Kemme)

I was volunteering in the intake room. We looked over the migrants' immigration papers and helped them connect with loved ones elsewhere in the United States who would arrange for their travel. Moments ago, Adriana had spoken with her brother.

"Sí, hermano," she said when I handed her the shelter's little Nokia cell phone. "Sí, estamos bien, gracias a Dios" (*Yes, we're fine, thanks be to God.*)

This is what most people said when they spoke with family, and it floored me. They had just voyaged from their dangerous, destitute homeland to an unknown country where they were detained like criminals. The shelter physician had diagnosed Adriana's daughter, 6 years old, with pneumonia. She was bent over, coughing, with her forehead on the table. Adriana's son, 3 years old, sat blankly in a little chair next to his sister, not squirmy like a healthy toddler. But they were "fine." I suppose that after such a journey, and such a life before the journey, just being alive and together was something.

Adriana handed the phone back to me when she had finished talking with her brother. He had assured us he would buy cross-country Greyhound bus tickets for her little family to go and live with him while they navigated asylum proceedings. Adriana sighed forcefully and lifted her chin, as if recognizing how far she had come and summoning courage for how far she still had to go.

"You're so close to reuniting with your brother," I said, peering into her weary eyes and reflecting all the love I could muster in mine.

"Sí, sí, Hermana. In a few days, we'll be there," she nodded tentatively.

"But you've been through so much," I acknowledged gently, giving her the space to share if she wanted to.

"Oh sí, Hermana!" she nodded more vigorously, eyes moistening. "It's been so hard. My babies are sick, and the journey was so long and hard, and in detention they treated us like animals ..."

"Can I hug you?" I asked.

Her answer was wordless; she immediately thrust herself forward, curling into me. Her body now heaved as weeks of pain and fear erupted into sobs. I was overcome with God's presence — I felt like my arms were God's arms, and God's love was pouring through me to her. The given-ness of God's love was using me

as a vessel. My heart fell to its knees, pulsing with tender compassion and humbled at the privilege of welcoming this precious woman and her family.

When she finally pulled away, breathing more calmly, I grasped her hands gently.

"You made it," I whispered. "You're going to be okay."

She smiled for the first time.

"I'm just happy we're finally in a place where there is love."

Beloved, be loved and be love

I don't think it's any accident that so many of the epistles we read in the Christmas season begin with the word "beloved." After an Advent blessed with receiving the gift of God's love, the word "beloved" jumps up and touches my heart again each time.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God," we read during Christmas Eve night prayer (1 John 4:7-11). "Beloved, if God so loved us, we must also love another" (1 John 4:11).

It seems that it is God's deepest hunger for us to know this truth — that we are beloved — and share that truth with every person we meet.

This is the joy of Christmas: It is not a one-day crescendo that leaves us melancholy once the presents are unwrapped and the lights come down. It is the story of love that brought forth the universe and then took on flesh to make that love even more visible, touchable, undeniable. It is the story of a God who, as Karl Rahner says, is both the giver and the gift. It is the story of knowing and sharing, of being loved and being love to others. The story is ours to receive and ours to retell, from generation to generation.

Beloved, simply open your heart, and let God make Christmas come alive in you and through you. Beloved, you are loved. And you are love.

*[Tracy Kemme is a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati who authored the blog *Diary of a Sister-in-Training* during formation. After a decade in social justice and Hispanic ministry, she is working toward her master's degree in pastoral ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.]*

Gift of light, the unremitting dawn

BY VIRGINIA HERBERS | DEC 14, 2018



(Unsplash / Yeshi Kangrang)

Recently, I've been avoiding a variety of things for some reason: Christmas card writing, cleaning out the refrigerator, paying bills, even getting a haircut. What's up with the delay, I ask myself? Is it busy-ness ... or laziness ... or lack of interest ... or something hidden deep in my psyche that I haven't yet been able to identify? (I doubt the spoiled broccoli in the fridge has much to do with any lingering resentment from my childhood, but who knows?)

Most of the things I've been avoiding are activities or traditions that I really enjoy — I love preparing and sending out Christmas greetings, I get a kick out of the details of bill-paying, and what's not to like about that great feeling of being shorn and freshly coiffed? So why the delay?

I could wax poetic about the season of Advent and the need to wait, to watch, to sit in the sense of anticipation. In this season, we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!" "Do not delay, O God," "Wait for the Lord with courage," "Prepare the way!" All of these verses indicate that waiting patiently but expectantly is part and parcel

of our annual Advent experience. We sit in the darkness and await the Light; we light Advent candles and await Christmas; we journey with Mary and await the birth of the Christ-Child. "More than watchman waits for the dawn, my soul waits for you, O Lord" (Psalm 130).

Is this sense of waiting what underlies my very mundane sense of delay? Maybe, maybe not. I have come to realize that there are really three main reasons for the delays I've been choosing.

The first reason (the most virtuous one) is because I am opting for something else. I haven't sat down at my desk to pay bills, for example, because I have given that time to other ventures that I deem more valuable — hospital visiting, spending unhurried time with loved ones, preparing special gifts. I have chosen how to spend my time and attention, and the cable company bill has not made the cut. This has Advent overtures — discerning what has real value in my life and giving it the reverence it deserves. People over projects; relationship over routine; quality time over obligation.

The second reason for my delay has very little connection to the Advent season. In the simple examples of avoidance I gave above, the delay is simply about not wanting to lose what I deem to be valuable hours of the day. Why spend an hour taking myself for a haircut when I could spend it answering email or squeezing in another committee meeting? These choices of procrastination are not discerned by virtue of the activity's value; these choices are about pragmatism, pure and simple. All in all, they are pretty benign.

The third experience of delay, however, is not so benign. This delay has to do with dread. When delay is about dread, something very non-Adventy is going on, something that I believe actually threatens to undermine all that Advent is intended to nurture. Dread is heavy and dark.

Think about something you might be dreading right now. Maybe the experience of dread is about having to face a difficult conversation or decision, maybe it is dread of losing a valuable relationship if certain topics are discussed, or maybe it's a dread of being lonely or lost or left behind. "Don't bring it up. You know it won't end well." "What if I bring this intention to prayer and really entrust it to God ... and nothing happens?" "If I forgive him, he may just hurt me again." This brand of delay is not the hopeful expectation of Christmas morning and it is not the choice for something of value over something less worthy. This brand of delay is colored by dread, filled with darkness and characterized by fear.

Darkness doesn't have to be scary — there are plenty of "dark" experiences that most of us actually look forward to: dark skies that allow starry nights to emerge; rooms that are darkened so we can sing "Happy Birthday;" and, of course, dark chocolate! Darkness in and of itself is not fearful. As the popular liturgical song goes, "Longing for light, we wait in darkness."

Darkness is natural; it is a very normal part of our everyday experience. It is not inherently scary, even

though it is not always comfortable. (Those lights had better come back on after the candles are blown out!) We rely mightily on the inevitability of the dawn's victory over those dark, dark nights. Darkness is tolerable because we know it is temporary. We have been promised the light, and we long for its return because we are not made for darkness. This promise is what takes the dread and the fear out of our experiences of the dark.

I remember believing as a kid that monsters lived under my bed. I wasn't exactly afraid of the dark; I was afraid of the monsters that came out in the dark! They would never emerge as long as the hallway light could shine under the door. Even the teeniest bit of light would ward them off. And so I came to understand the saving power of the Light. And I learned how to perceive even the dimmest light source in a dark place. Finding even the darkest light (or the lightest dark?) provided a sense of hope, a sense of relief, and a sense of promise. My big sister taught me that the darkness, even if fearful, need not be dreaded. It can be endured. And I was able to emerge on the other side of it. Every morning. Every single morning.

No small lesson, that. The darkness is real and it will return on something of a regular basis. But it will never — ever — gain the victory. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it" (John 1:5). Welcome, Advent! Remind us again of the power of darkness. Teach us anew of the beauty it holds as it beckons us beyond our dread and into the unremitting dawn. Every day. Every single day.

[Virginia Herbers is an Apostle of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She has master's degree in pastoral studies and has ministered in education at both the elementary and high school levels in Connecticut, New York, Missouri and Taiwan. She currently serves as the vice-provincial for the United States province of her community.]

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Different kind of Christmas

BY JENNIFER DOYLE | FEB. 7, 2018



The view from Bon Secours Hospital toward downtown Baltimore, Maryland (Judith Carmichael)

Christmas was a little different this year.

Ever since I was a little girl, Christmas has been one of my least favorite holidays.

Of course, in my family we celebrated with family and friends, and we always received gifts on the feast of St. Nicholas all the way through little Christmas. But for me, it was only stuff.

As I grew up, I began to truly experience Advent. Preparing my heart for the coming of the Christ child opened my eyes to the real meaning of Christmas and helped me journey with the Holy Family to that busy night in the stable.

This past year, when I entered the Sisters of Bon Secours, I knew Christmas wouldn't look the same, but I had no idea of the gifts that I would receive.

As Christmas approached, I decided to volunteer with one of our sisters to visit our hospital on Christmas Day. Bon Secours Hospital in West Baltimore opened its doors in 1919; ever since then, it has been a constant presence in that neighborhood, meeting the needs of the people.

This Christmas, I would get to help hand out gifts!

The gifts were wrapped items that were made or purchased throughout the year — items like socks, hats, gloves or blankets, wrapped with love and ready for Christmas morning.

Christmas morning arrived and began like every other morning. We awoke, said morning prayer, and wished each other a "Merry Christmas." Then I was off to the hospital — a place I went almost every day — but that day would be unlike any other.

That day, we visited each patient, spent time with them, and gave them a reason to smile — two gifts. One gift was our presence and the other was a little something for themselves, to let each patient know that they were loved.

The difference this year was that I not only helped to bring joy to others, but I also opened my own heart and allowed myself to experience the true joy of not only hearing, but feeling, the words of Luke: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

I returned home on Christmas Day just in time for dinner with the sisters, and as I looked around the table at everyone — sisters, family members and friends — I was overcome with a true sense of peace and belonging.

As little Christmas approached, I was reminded that it's the little things that make life worth living: the smile of a stranger, a random act of kindness, the glow of the Christmas lights, hearing your favorite song at just the right time, or reminiscing about fond memories in the still quiet night.

Each of our sisters truly reached out to me in a special way this holiday season, and I am proud to say that I let them in.

Since I graduated with my bachelor's degree in 2005, I have worked with clients every Christmas. I thought this year would be similar, until it actually happened — I experienced something completely different even though I was still working and celebrating with clients.

I have come to deeply appreciate making Christmas a special time for those who aren't able to celebrate Christmas in the traditional sense.

I can't wait to add more traditions next year!

[Jennifer Doyle is a candidate with the Sisters of Bon Secours USA; she entered that congregation on June 18, 2017. Originally from Dunmore, Pennsylvania, she currently lives in Maryland. She has a master's degree in social work, and her ministry is with Bon Secours Community Works, working primarily with families caught in poverty in inner city Baltimore.]

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