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



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December 16, 2022

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As we wait for the Lord's coming this Advent, may each of us Christians change our lives with concrete actions: living the faith, practicing charity and love, living justice, and respecting one another, because when the Lord comes, He will judge us by the standard of love and charity. At the last judgment we will hear: "Whatever you did

for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25: 35-40).

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.