Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



Mercy Sr. Jennifer Wilson and Hope Willert, her student, prepare materials for a service trip to Guayana in March 2017. (Courtesy of Jennifer Wilson)



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Several years ago, I organized a service trip to Guyana in South America. I asked one of my students if she would be interested in going. I could see the shock and hesitancy on her face. I don't know if she said, "Why me?", but I suspect she was thinking it.

Her parents questioned why they should send their 15-year-old to a country they were unfamiliar with. I could only give them reassurances that I would do my best to ensure she was safe.

Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas. During Advent, I heard over and over again the power and promise of Mary's yes. I found myself stumbling over that yes and wondering about it.

The biggest of my wonderings had me saying, "OK, God, I don't really get this. Here we are making a big deal over Mary's yes, but really, what choice did she have? If she would have said no, what would have happened? Would Jesus still have been born? Does the yes really matter if it was going to happen anyway, whether or not she actually agreed?"

I could have had this theological conversation with friends, fellow sisters or my spiritual director, but at that moment I was tired and curious, so I asked Google if Mary's yes really mattered because why wouldn't Google know?

I read that in 2013 Pope Francis wrote, "Mary first conceived Jesus in faith and then in the flesh, when she said 'yes' to the message God gave her through the angel. What does this mean? It means that God did not want to become man by bypassing our freedom; he wanted to pass through Mary's free assent, through her 'yes.' He asked her: 'Are you prepared to do this?' And she replied: 'Yes.' "

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This led to me reflecting about the times I have said yes. The times that one yes led to something else and then something else again. Sometimes I marvel at these times I have said yes, and I start, for just a moment, to think about how great I am. I said yes, and then look what it led to.

I have said yes many times, and when I started to think about how wonderful I am to say yes, I forget that in the moment there was a very important piece missing. God is in every yes, and what happens after the yes is not completely controlled by us.

I would not be a Sister of Mercy without my initial yes. It was God's way of asking me, like Mary, are you prepared to do this?

Prepared, probably not, but willing like Mary, to see where God leads me, yes. Perhaps this is where the scary part of yes comes in. It is a leap of faith; you really have no idea what God will do with your yes. Will it lead to something else, to a closed door, or to something completely different?

The student I asked to go to Guyana said yes. She and her parents have a deep faith and felt God was leading Hope to go on the trip.

In Guyana, I watched Hope fall in love with the children at the orphanage. I saw her experience wonder and awe in a culture that was different from her own.

Hope wanted to go back to Guyana, but Covid didn't allow for that to happen. However, that initial yes has led Hope in a direction no one would have guessed. Hope is by nature a bit shy and quiet. People in her family would have envisioned her staying close to home after college. However, God had other plans for Hope.

That one yes to go to Guyana led Hope to the Czech Republic, Zambia and Paraguay during college. She will graduate in May. Being a missionary is not the direction Hope or her parents envisioned, but God had different plans. Hope is headed to Zambia after graduation to participate in a missionary preparatory program.

I can best understand all this stuff about Mary's yes when I go back to Pope Francis. He also wrote, " But what took place most singularly in the Virgin Mary also takes place within us, spiritually, when we receive the word of God with a good and sincere heart and put it into practice. It is as if God takes flesh within us; he comes to dwell in us, for he dwells in all who love him and keep his word."

It is not easy to understand this, but really, it is easy to feel it in our heart. The yes I said when I said yes to the Sisters of Mercy, Hope's yes, and all of our little ways of saying yes lead back to knowing it is the way God is leading us even if we can't possibly understand.

It's two weeks into the new year, and by now most traces of Christmas are only a memory. However, the message and miracle of Christmas doesn't leave us when all is put away. What are the ways you will say yes to where God is leading in this new year?