News
Religious Life



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by The Life Panelists

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During Christmas, generosity takes many forms — from simple acts of kindness to community celebrations. Sisters from around the world reflect on how these expressions of generosity bring light and hope to their ministries.

This month we asked the sister panelists for The Life to respond to the question: *How does your community embody the spirit of generosity during Christmas? Can you share a moment when it brought unexpected blessings to your life or ministry?*



Sr. Grace Akunna John-Emezi is a member of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, an international congregation. She grew up in a Catholic and Anglican house in Nigeria. She works as a hospital administrator. She is a health care leader in public health advocacy, particularly breast cancer awareness by encouraging early detection, educating communities and building referral networks. She is passionate about women's health and leadership development among religious women, empowering others through education and compassion.

Dec. 8 is a very special day for me — the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and my birthday. Each year, this special day reminds me of my life as a religious woman, a pure gift of grace from God and my wonderful parents. Every Dec. 8 draws me again to God's overflowing love and grace. It moves my heart toward gratitude and hope, inspiring me to reflect on God's divine generosity in my life and apostolate.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception always falls during Advent, a season that points us toward Christmas as we prepare for the coming of our Infant King — the incarnation of Jesus. During Christmas, we ponder God's astonishing generosity, revealed in Jesus born in a manger.

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His coming helps me understand how completely God gave himself to humanity so that we may partake in his divinity. This reflection challenges me to practice humility and to live the motto of my congregation — "Love and Service" — as Jesus and Mary did.

In my community, the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, the spirit of generosity is expressed through simple but deeply meaningful acts of love. Christmas is more than a celebration; it is a time to make God's kindness visible. During Christmas, we share food, visit homes, pray with families, and offer counsel and encouragement, especially to those most in need in the rural community we serve.

For us, generosity is not measured by how much we give but by how much people experience the love of Christ through us.



(Unsplash/Camila Levita)

A moment of unexpected blessing for me was when I visited an elderly, sick widow who was very poor. She didn't have much to offer me but she had a beautiful smile and much love in her heart. I sat with her, listened to her pain and offered my shoulders to lean on and cry.

After I prayed with her, she gave me small peanuts — the only gift that she had. Initially I didn't want to accept them, knowing it was all she had. But she held my hands and said: "Sister, take this. If you do not accept this, how will God bless me?" (Mark 12:41-44).

At that moment, I understood the real meaning of generosity. Her gift blessed my life more than she could ever imagine.



Sr. Helen Mueting, a Benedictine Sister of Mount St. Scholastica, taught high school English in Kansas, Missouri and Iowa. Currently, she is secretary for the community in Atchison, Kansas. When not working in the office, she enjoys mowing, gardening, extracting honey and working outside. Her favorite Scripture quote is "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?"

As far back as I can remember, Christmas has been a time for my community to give to others. In my living group, we have collected money to send to charitable organizations or have adopted a family to give needed clothing and gifts for their children. My community has also opened our Christmas Eve Mass to the public and followed the Mass with pecan rolls and hot chocolate for our guests. This has brought much joy to the guests who have shared with us, and many return each year for the celebration.

Although I am sure our donations and Christmas Eve sharing have enriched other lives, the event that brought the most unexpected blessing to us as a community was totally out of our control.

We had celebrated our Christmas Eve Eucharist and the agape after it. Christmas Day had arrived. Our tables were set for our traditional Christmas banquet, and the meal was prepared. We were just finishing Christmas Day Mass when our whole schedule changed. One of our sisters noticed water gushing from a pipe in the hallway outside our dining room. The gushing water had set off a fire alarm, which soon brought the fire department and EMTs to our door.



Volunteers and an EMT help clear water in the hallway during the flooding at the monastery on Christmas 2022. (Courtesy of the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica)

The cold weather of that day not only caused our pipes to break but complicated the work ahead. Soon, instead of going to our Christmas dinner, we were grabbing brooms, squeegees, water vacs and anything that would help remove the water. The gushing water was shut off, but we had water in the hallway and the dining room, and it was leaking into the basement laundry room.

Sisters dressed in their Sunday clothes joined together in the effort to push water out the side door. When the firefighters and EMT's arrived, they also helped, some even slipping on the ice that formed outside the door. Many of our employees also helped, and others from town came with industrial fans to help dry the carpets.

Dinner was later than normal and ended up being served from a portable warmer in our small lunchroom to the sisters who couldn't help with the cleanup. Everyone else ate as they were able.

The unexpected blessing came in the form of generous volunteers who gave up their own Christmas celebrations to help us; in the spontaneous generosity of sisters immediately pitching in to help with the cleanup; in the calm acceptance of a late dinner without all the Christmas fanfare; and in the joy of a community coming together to help us in our need. All of us felt the warmth and the camaraderie of a community that cared.



Sr. Mary Lilian Akhere Ehidiamhen, from Nigeria, is a member of the Sisters for Christian Community. She is a certified trainer on nonviolent communication with the Center for Nonviolent Communication in Austin, Texas. She majored in theological ethics with specific interest in social and peace ethics from KU Leuven in Belgium. Her ministry focuses on how nonviolent communication can contribute to Catholic social teaching on peace. She is currently teaching religious education at St. Ignatius College in Enfield, London.

In my Sisters for Christian Community congregation, Christmas is an important celebration. We begin with Advent preparations to reconnect and savor the mystery of Incarnation celebrated at Christmas. On the first Sunday of Advent, the sisters in my region (Ruah — U.K./Ireland) gathered in prayer and lit the first Advent candle in preparation for Christmas.

During this Advent celebration, we reflected on hope in the light of our mission as Sisters For Christian Community: "To birth a new understanding of the reign of God."

We reminded ourselves, in the words of Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr: "When we speak of Advent or waiting for Christmas or preparing for Christmas, we're not talking about waiting for a little baby Jesus to be born — that already happened, 2,000 years ago. We're, in fact, welcoming the universal Christ, the cosmic Christ — the Christ that is forever being born in the human soul and into history."

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To realize birthing a new understanding of the reign of God and welcoming the cosmic Christ, we agreed that we need to give hope both to one another and to the people we serve through small acts of generosity and compassionate listening. Our focus on compassionate listening is twofold — to my community of Sisters for Christian Community and to the people we serve in the wider community.

One distinguishing mark of the Sisters for Christian Community is that we are part of the community we serve. We do not take up a separate identity because we want to stay close to the needs of those around us, especially the marginalized, "living with the smell of the sheep," as Pope Francis said.

Most of us live geographically apart but we remain an integral part of the communities where we live and work. One practical way to embody the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love is generosity. Despite our different apostolates, we intentionally meet virtually each week for Advent prayer, reflecting on how to live out the Advent theme of the week.

This coming together strengthens our connection and support as a community. The support I receive prepares me inwardly to give that connection generously to others — an unexpected blessing in my life and ministry.



Sisters for Christian Community attend a gathering for the Spain and Ruah — U.K./Ireland regions, held Aug. 18-21, 2025, at Alnmouth, United Kingdom. (Courtesy of Mary Lilian Akhere)

A major theme in our reflections this week is listening and being generously present to others in a broken world where people are looking for someone to listen to their "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties" (Gaudium et Spes). As a community, we are intentionally committed to listening, especially as we prepare for Christmas. This commitment has brought unexpected blessings of connection with one another and those we serve.

Our mission of generous, compassionate listening is ongoing, not just for Christmas. The generosity of the Sisters for Christian Community also lies in modeling a nonhierarchical community supporting each other as equals without superiors — a rare practice in religious life and the wider world — sharing power generously and equally.



Sr. Ritamary Brown, a Hospital Sister of St Francis, is a volunteer at Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, a nonprofit global health entity founded in 2002 by the Hospital Sisters of St. Francis. Her professional experience includes a 40-year career as a dietitian and administrator throughout Hospital Sisters Health System hospitals. Her roles have been in both clinical and administrative areas, including food/nutrition, mission, facilities, environmental services and advocacy. She has also been involved with efforts that serve those who experience poverty and promote equitable access to health care, such as a pregnancy care center, an organ and tissue transplant program, and the American Dietetic Association, now known as the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

My religious community has always embodied the Franciscan spirit of caring and sharing through our hospital ministries. We have a tradition of making Christmas a special time for our patients, visitors and staff. There is a special Mass, holiday cards on the patient trays, and many employees running around in Santa Claus hats. The magic of the holidays is palpable.

In years past, when I was the director of Food and Nutrition Services at one of our larger hospitals, we sponsored a noon meal in the cafeteria for anyone needing a place to go for Christmas. We knew there were many folks in our community who had no one with whom to share this very special day.

The dietitians planned a menu they knew would be easy to eat and recognizable: turkey, mashed potatoes, dressing, Jell-O salads, and always ice cream and Christmas cookies. The cafeteria was decorated with poinsettias, holly, evergreen and candles. Christmas music filled the air.

We advertised on the local radio station to make sure as many folks as possible knew about the event, and we had a team of drivers who picked up anyone who had no way to get there. We even went to the Emergency Room to see if any of our patients there could join us.

> During Christmastime, we often picture the newborn baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, but that's not the only way he arrives.
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One year, several hundred people showed up, some very early, just to be with others on Christmas. One of our employees had a grandson who happily dressed up as
Santa. Of course, his appearance added to the excitement of the day.

In the midst of the joyful confusion, a nicely dressed, handsome young man appeared and told me that he would like to sing for us. Trusting he was sincere and could indeed sing, I said, "Go ahead, as soon as we say grace." What followed was a stunning experience. He not only had a beautiful voice but also wandered around the room enchanting our guests. Everyone was mesmerized by this incredible entertainment. He soon finished singing, and the feast began.

As the guests were served Christmas dinner, I wanted to thank him but suddenly realized he had disappeared, without a word or an expectation of appreciation. To this day, his identity remains a mystery, but the gift he shared stands out in my mind as one of the most memorable Christmases I ever had.

During Christmastime, we often picture the newborn baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, but that's not the only way he arrives. That Christmas, I learned Jesus can also come as a charming man with a beautiful voice wearing an expensive tweed jacket.



Sr. Suzanne Patterson has been a member of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Notre Dame, Indiana, for more than 60 years, spending eight of those years in community leadership. Growing up an Army brat, Patterson met

people in a variety of cultures, providing her with experiences that enriched her religious life. Throughout her ministry, she has served as an educator and school administrator; has worked in pastoral ministry with women in Chimbote, Peru; and currently is accompanying individuals who are experiencing homelessness and living with mental health issues. Her current passion is supporting members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

> *For somehow, not only for Christmas, but for all the long year through,*
> *The joy that you give to others is the joy that comes back to you;*
> *And the more you spend in blessing the poor, the lonely and sad,*
> *The more to your heart's possessing, returns to make you glad.*
>
> —"*The Christmas Tree,*" *Margaret Sangster, 1878*

We Holy Cross sisters minister in eight countries. Though the cultures are diverse, a common thread runs through their stories of generosity and joy at Christmas. Who better to tell these stories than our sisters? (Thank goodness for WhatsApp!)

Sr. Juliana Santos Sousa, who ministers in Brazil, shared that generosity happens in the smallest details of everyday life. At Christmastime, generosity overflows as each sister carries out activities with the people they accompany. The most beautiful part of these activities is the joy of presence and togetherness.

In Peru, Sr. Noylí Margo Ríos Manzo facilitates a project to help participants deal with stress and violence. She celebrated Christmas with women and their children, giving thanks to the divine creator and recognizing the Child Jesus as their light and hope in this time of great challenges.



Holy Cross Sr. Noylí Margo Ríos Manzo, seated far right, celebrates Christmas with women and their children in Peru. (Courtesy of Noylí Margo Ríos Manzo)

Sisters in Ghana throw Christmas parties for local children and build community with groups of ministry companions. In Takoradi, Sr. Comfort Arthur highlighted their outreach to female prison inmates, the elderly and other vulnerable individuals. Food is regularly distributed, and special Christmas packages are given to ensure everyone feels included. In Kasoa, Sr. Monica Assifuah-Nunoo described similar efforts to make the Christmas season meaningful and enjoyable for those with whom they minister.

Sr. Angelica Birungi in Fort Portal, Uganda, described the sisters' ministry with elders. People are brought together to enjoy a simple Christmas meal and are gifted a package to celebrate at home — usually rice, sugar, salt and soap.

In the United States, Sr. Timothea Kingston explained how sisters at the motherhouse help those in need. Each week, a simple meal is served in the dining room. The money saved by not serving an entrée is used to assist others during the

year, especially at Christmas.

At my own ministry, I am moved by the eager willingness of our novices, who jump to help amid the challenges of ministering to those experiencing homelessness. Their hearts are open, reaching out in love as they serve a warm breakfast to those who come to our door. They are a continual source of joy and inspiration, calling me to give more of myself.

Sisters persistently "keep on keepin' on!" all year long, united in walking with the uncared for, the unrecognized and the misunderstood.

What unexpected joy this Christmas season brings!

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. View the full series.