Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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This time last year, a dear friend said to me, "I remember what you said, so I'm not saying to everyone, 'We must catch up before Christmas.' " For a moment, I was puzzled, then the penny dropped. I had determined not to allow the days of Advent to become so crammed with commitments, as well as the usual Christmas preparations, that by "the big day," I was exhausted, and over it!

One strategy was to avoid saying, "We must catch up/visit/get together — or do anything unnecessary — before Dec. 25. After all, Christmas is a season, not just one day. While in the commercial world, St Stephen's Day, Dec. 26 (Boxing Day here in Australia), is a day of frenzied sale shopping, liturgically, the Octave of Christmas takes us through to the new calendar year, incorporating the feast of the Holy Family.

These days — usually warm to unbearably hot Down Under — are an ideal time to renew friendships and spend time with loved ones. The Christmas tree and trimmings remain intact, and a lovely feeling of relaxation characterizes our days. For many, the thwack of (cricket) bat meeting ball is the soundtrack of summer.

I notice that advertisers jump on the bandwagon of the Christmas deadline. New furniture, landscaping, home extensions and renovations are all touted as necessary "in time for Christmas." It's well to remember that no renovations, or even accommodation bookings, preceded the birth of Jesus. He was born of humble parents in humble surroundings — amid a good deal of fear, surely.

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The visitors who arrived, according to Matthew and Luke, came not to inspect or pass judgment but to welcome, encourage and bring gifts which were harbingers of the fate of this tiny baby.

Those humorous memes which proclaim that the gifts brought by the Magi were of little practical use, and that women would have brought what Mary really needed, carry a certain truth.

Nevertheless, an undue focus on preparing the "things" of Christmas — gifts, decorations, gourmet delights — can easily cross the line into seeing "the day" as an end in itself, not an observance, a celebration of the birth of Jesus.

The celebration of any birth can mimic the celebration of Jesus' birth, but when the party's over, the new baby takes his or her place in the family and community, and to some extent, continues to be celebrated.

Do we see our Christmas celebrations as a beginning, or an end?

Do we see Christmas as a joyous headline, not the ultimate deadline?