Columns
Social Justice



Sister Leema leads a dance, assisted by children who are boarders and joined by children of the village of Ratanpur, North-Eastern India, during Christmas 2020. (Courtesy of Frida Toppo)



by Frida Toppo

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The celebration of Christmas among the poor and simple Indigenous people of Ratanpur, in the Aizawl Diocese, North-Eastern India, was a new and unique experience for me and the people of that village.

The place is 16 kilometers away from St. Mary's Church in Hailakandi. I had visited Ratanpur on Nov. 1, 2020. After my transfer to Assam from Manipur state in North-Eastern India, it was my first visit to this village, and it touched my heart for my life and mission as a nun.

When we returned, I was left with many questions, like "How is it that vulnerable and marginalized people — through no fault of their own — face many challenges and lack many opportunities to live a dignified life?" It is simply because of where they are born. When will those villagers, my brothers and sisters, come up in life and live a better and dignified life?

My heart remains there. I constantly ask myself if I can do something for them.

There are only seven Catholic families, numbering 27 persons in total, in the village. Each family lives in a small bamboo house surrounded by betel nut trees. They are simple and loving people, with no modern technology like computers, the internet, television sets and smartphones. They lag behind in education and the employment opportunities of urban life. They do not have access to many comforts and conveniences available to other people in their society.

Their village is far away from the daily market, and having no means of income, they are not able to afford nutritious food. But the people of the village are close to the environment that provides them sustenance and subsistence.

Life in this remote village seems so hard, lonely and dry, but they have bright smiles on their faces, and loving, caring hearts. This is a priceless attribute we can notice in each of them.

After the holy Mass on that day, they shared their meal with a lot of concern and love for us — a group of priests, nuns and lay men and women who went there to

celebrate with the villagers an early Christmas during this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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And then I thought again that I would do something for them as Christmas drew near. One of our community discussions was about the celebration of Christmas. Our Maria Sadan convent leader, Sister Little Flower, asked us how we would like to celebrate Christmas.

My mind and heart went to Ratanpur because every time I had a good meal at the convent, I was remembering them. So, I wanted to celebrate Christmas with them.

I expressed my thoughts to the sisters I live with, and was happy when everyone agreed to it. On Dec. 20, Sister Little Flower, along with some of the girls who board with us, went ahead of us and decorated the small bamboo church in the village.

Some parish youth also joined us to encourage and cheer them up. Fr. Michael Toppo, the assistant parish priest and principal of St. Mary's School, went with us taking his music and choir group.

We had prepared a delicious meal and Christmas cake at our convent and took them to the village. As we were approaching the place, I could see young children waiting at the road far away from the village hill to welcome us with their innocent, loving smiles.

We had a meaningful Christmas Mass celebration by Fr. Toppo. After the Mass, we had a brief entertainment of song and dance provided by the boarding girls and youth. We also conducted some games for children and parents, giving away prizes like T-shirts, fancy caps, glasses and cups.

We were so pleased to notice that young and old — everyone — participated in all the programs with hearts and minds. We were so happy that they enjoyed themselves! It was amazing to see the gentle and loving smiles on everyone's faces.



Fr. Michael Toppo (left), Sister Leema (center), Sr. Frida Toppo (right) and some of the children who board at the Nirmala children's home run by the sisters (Courtesy of Frida Toppo)

After the program, we served a fellowship meal together.

Before we left the village, we visited all the families and prayed for them.

When it was time for departure, Monika Suwer, a 35-year-old mother, said, "We do not get any visitors to our village. We are glad that you all came. We were excited and were waiting for you all from the morning. I feel sad to leave you."

Helena Sumer, the senior-most woman of the village, exclaimed, "For the first time in our life, we had a great Christmas celebration in the village. I am so glad!"

For my part, I was glad to be there in the presence of Catholics in a remote village of the parish. We spent our day with them, from morning until evening. I was inspired by their generosity in giving their time. Young and old, men and women — all of

them — stayed with us till the end.

It was hard to say goodbye to them that day.

I thought to myself: "How rich are they in love and care! How kind and generous they are in giving their valuable time for us!"

Though they are uneducated they showed me how to be simple, to depend, to trust in the providence of God, and to live in joy and peace.

As I look back, all that I can say is that 2020 Christmas with the villagers in a remote corner of North-East India was memorable and enriching for me, and will make a lasting impression on me and my mission. I gained more than I gave them.

Finally, that Christmas visit will prompt my community members and me to make arduous efforts to visit Catholic families in far-flung areas of the parish. We will provide pastoral programs for faith enrichment in families, for the empowerment of men and women, for children's education, and we hope to motivate them to seek new livelihood options.

These initiatives would bring some solace to the villagers and enable them to live better, more dignified lives, knowing their rights as villagers. Our Christmas gift to them!