Columns
Spirituality



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Another Christmas season came! Advent was really a unique experience for me. The phrase "*I got the opportunity but did not make good use of it*" is one I have heard often but recently it spoke to me in a new way because it resonated with my experience. I realized in a new way that each season is an opportunity to respond to God's will, renew my relationship with him and live life to the fullest.

Advent is an example of one of those chances that God gives us to love better, to act more justly and walk more humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). However, some of these opportunities go unnoticed, while others demand too much of us and we decide not to attempt them. Once the time has passed, we begin to regret and wish we had done better.

The fruits of Advent shape the Christmas season, as Christmas shapes the rest of the year. I am more conscious that, what we put emphasis on in Advent and Christmas spells out our vision for the future. Those seasons are value-based, and alert us to respond to the signs of the time.

For example, during the last Advent — among other challenges — adaptation to climate change was the trending topic as COP27 took place in Egypt. I understood that making our environment habitable is part of preparing for Jesus' coming. The preparation has to be broader than I have done it previously, a God-given opportunity to think about creation and do something to conserve it.

Pope Francis refers to planet Earth as "our common home" (*Laudato Si'*). This requires more inclusivity in which all creation is readied for Jesus' coming. He is *God-with-us* and our task is to make a home for him so that he can accomplish his salvific mission.

The external world reflects the inner world of our hearts. When we intentionally take care of our environment for Jesus, our hearts get transformed in the process. If only we realized that when we make water, food, shelter and love available for Jesus, we are doing it for our brothers and sisters in need! He said: *Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me* (Matthew 25:40). This is a great revelation for living out the preferential option for the poor.

When we wait for Jesus — at whatever time of year — we can compare it to the way we wait for important "high and mighty" earthly guests. It puts pressure on us to ensure that they find our homes and hospitality at their best. All our other business is put on hold. If we go to this length for our fellow human beings, how much more should we do to welcome Emmanuel? He is the guest of guests who died that we may all have life and have it abundantly. Our anticipation is even deeper.

As Christmas season ends, each day should be Christmas, since the one who has loved us so dearly is still among us. Despite his presence in our midst, our world is still suffering. It seems that — though he has come — we are not aware of the gift that we have. In a world that is just coming to terms with the harsh consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, life remains a challenge since the effects of climate change are also overwhelming us, affecting the poorest of our world most.

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The recently concluded COP27 climate summit in Egypt is a pacesetter for us. It involved people of all walks of life, who shared their stories about how different parts of our world are responding to the effects of climate change. One of the fruits of this summit was the agreement of Nov. 20, 2022. It was signed by government ministers and negotiators from nearly 200 countries, to create a new fund to compensate poor nations for the "loss and damage" they are experiencing as a result of extreme weather worsened by climate change.

This summit was the first to see the topic of loss and damage funding formally make it onto the COP27 agenda, though the issue was first raised by climate-vulnerable countries 30 years ago. What an opportune time for Christ to be born. He will continue to grow in our midst and his world and his people must be protected from the harsh effects of climate change. Jesus loved nature and used many illustrations from it in his teaching.

We rely on our environment to feed our imagination. Think of Jesus' parables and Isaiah's image of *the wolf living with the lamb, the panther lying down with the kid and calf and lion cub feeding together with a little boy to lead them* (Isaiah 11:6-9). I think that ignoring our creation is the path to not understanding God. As time goes by, biodiversity continues to be lost. This is a concern for our future generations; people coming after us may not see half of what our generation has experienced.

So let us leave our comfort zones, our boardrooms, and conference halls, and get our hands busy in making this worthy cause a reality.

To nurture the newborn king, we must commit ourselves to restoring our creation in our unique ways and in our own contexts. Three gifts we could give Jesus for his birthday: *a creation almost like the Garden of Eden* from which he can draw references for us as he teaches us; *a world where everyone has something to eat from creation*, which is the table of God; and *a world where preferential option* for the poor is the way of life.

This can happen if we make environmental conservation our business. Having done this, from Christmas season onwards, like Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:39-42), we will be able to sit at his feet enjoying his presence unperturbed, having a quality time with him.