Opinion
Blog
Spirituality



(GSR artwork/Olivia Bardo)



by Helga Leija

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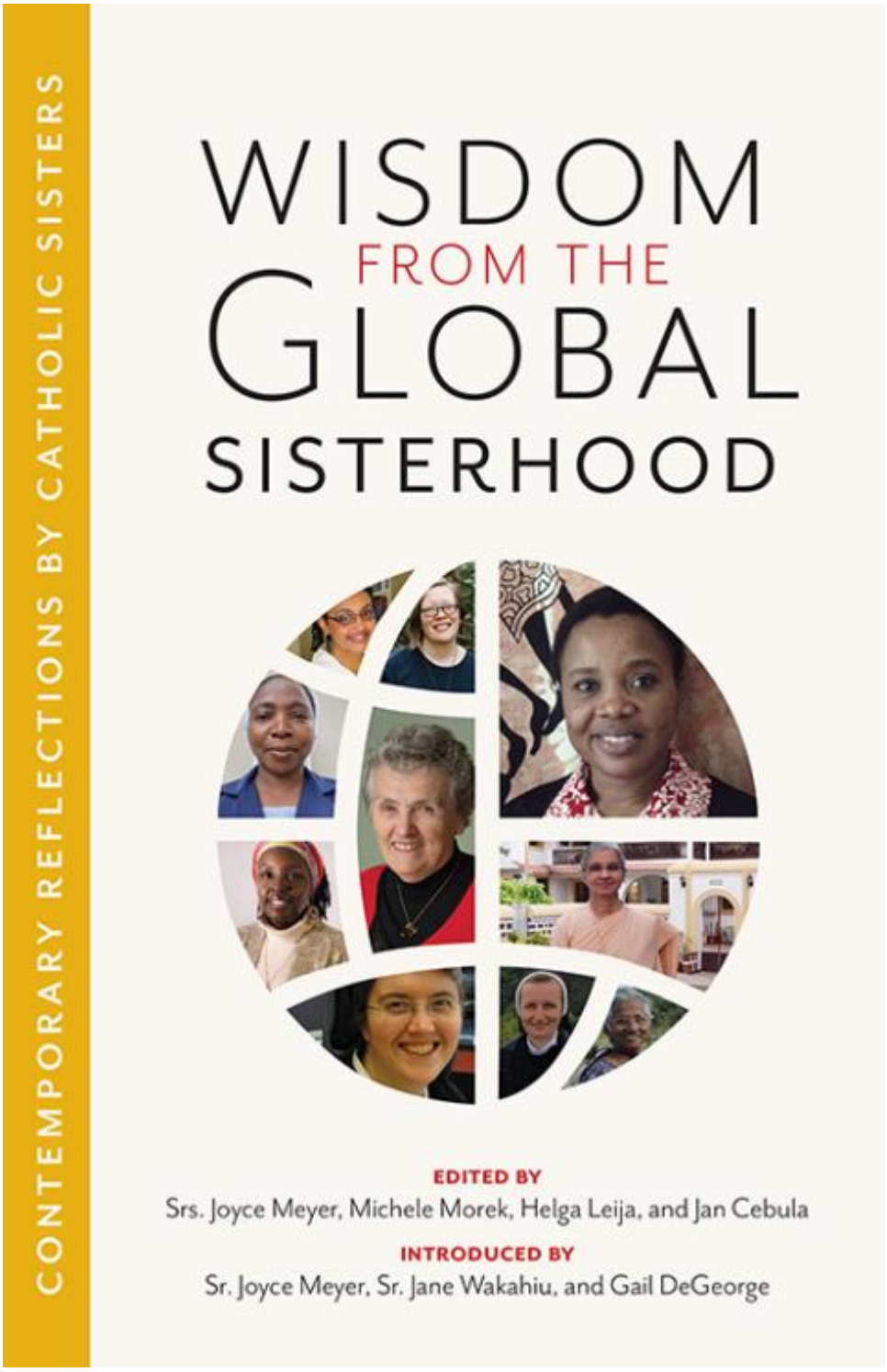
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Wisdom from the Global Sisterhood — Global Sisters Report's first book published earlier this year — is a powerful collection of columns from women religious all over the world. Each chapter offers a window into their daily lives, their meditations, and the incredible work they do to make the world a better place.

In Vietnam, a Dominican community brought hope and joy to struggling neighbors during the pandemic, responding to the Advent call to "make rough ways smooth" and carrying it into the Christmas spirit of giving. This column reminds us that our Advent preparation doesn't end when the season shifts; it transforms into the active, loving presence that Christmas calls forth.



Wisdom from the Global Sisterhood. Liturgical Press, 2024. Edited by Srs. Joyce Meyer, Michele Morek, Helga Leija, and Jan Cebula; Introduced by Sr. Joyce Meyer, Sr. Jane Wakahiu, and Gail DeGeorge.

In Immokalee, Florida, the Christmas story comes to life among an immigrant community where the courage and faith of Haitian refugees mirror that of Mary and

Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem. One young couple, after leaving detention, found temporary refuge in a tiny apartment, preparing for the birth of their child: "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy." In the quiet and hardship, they found God present, just as we can, if we look.

The book is a perfect gift for the season, divided into different sections, with themes including grief and healing, the gift of community, care for creation, reflections in ministry, and Advent and Lent, to name a few. Each focuses on unique aspects of the sisters' experiences of waiting, watching and celebrating sightings of God's presence, and each column closes with a reflection for the reader. The stories are sentinels of hope reflected in Psalm 130, giving voice to hearts suffering apocalyptic events of war, hunger, floods, drought, disappointment, betrayal, loneliness and spiritual darkness — and yet, still finding hope in God's faithfulness. Floods will cease. Rain will come to parched Earth. Someone will reach out to the lonely. New life is not at an end; babies are born and new life is springing forth from seeds planted whether by nature or courage of soul.

It's a book that inspires, uplifts and opens our hearts to the stories of countless women religious who dedicate their lives to others. We encourage you to consider giving this book as a Christmas gift and help us to continue to lift the voices of sisters around the world.

In wishing you a peaceful and merry Christmas season, below we're sharing a couple shortened excerpts from the Advent chapter.



We are called to a new incarnation, *by Cheryl Rose, of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary*

I have always loved this word: *Incarnation*! It captures the glorious mystery of God becoming human in the person of Jesus. Incarnation was a sacred word, bringing a sense of awe to a grade school child who waited in joyful anticipation for the greatest moment of the year — the wonder of Christmas! Of course, it also meant the lights and decorations in our homes and towns that turned dark winter days into glittering, glowing wonderlands.

Yet even as a child, something way more than Santa Claus stirred in the air for me as our purple-shrouded church joined the centuries of faithful people longing for the coming of a savior. Each Advent candle that we lit reminded us to be patient, for he *would* come! Despite the natural excitement of toys and gifts, and cookies and trees, the plaintive, haunting notes of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" stirred a longing that every soul sensed at some deep level.

The silence of winter nights drew us into our longing for something to ease the darkness and sadness that lurked in the shadows of life on this earth. Young and old alike yearned for the Messiah to bring light to the weary world. Disillusioned hearts searched for something real that no amount of tinsel could promise: *incarnation* — the unimagined gift, the outrageously hopeful miracle that God would enter our human experience and take on the full gamut of this journey of ours, and for one reason — to help us know how to be human!



An Advent wreath is seen in this undated photo. (CNS/Arlington Herald/Ann M. Augherton)

How many years have I welcomed that Advent season, ready to enter deeply into pondering the darkness around me — in my own little life, and in the midst of seemingly unsolvable, desperate problems encircling the world? From every corner came cries for justice, mercy, compassion and peace. Advent waiting became Advent longing and yearning and aching for a peace we could not construct ourselves. And as we grew older, the sobering realization dawned on us that only "*You* satisfy the hungry heart."

But finally, there came a time when things shifted a bit for me, and I began to realize that I, too, was *incarnated*! My soul took human form so that I could learn many great lessons on this human journey. My "incarnation" meant experiencing hunger and physical pain — and accidents and disappointments, and heartache and failure — all *great* teachers of incalculable lessons. So, too, my incarnation has meant delicious feasts and the warmth of human touch, and the boundless freedom of dance and running and swimming! It has meant tender love, rich relationships, listening with compassion and touching the pain of others. It has meant a million human joys and delights . . . great books, breathtaking music, and ecstasies over the beauty and wonder of Earth's skies and rivers, oceans, mountains and forests!

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Incarnation opened my human mind and heart to experience the holiness of an infant's face, a child's innocent play, a bird's effortless flight, a beloved elder's familiar, worn hand, so sacred in mine. And God walks among us in all of this, showing us how to bear ecstasy as well as sorrow.

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> —Sr. Cheryl Rose

My incarnation baptized me into discipleship, set my feet on his path, and began an apprenticeship of "putting on the mind and heart of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Meditating on his life dispelled many false assumptions about who God is, what being a good person involves, and what really matters in this human journey. The incarnated Christ modeled living without ego, without duality. He embodied the amazing truth that all are one! We are *one* with God, we are one with every person of every culture and religion, and with every blade of grass, every drop of water, every plant and animal cohabitating with us. His example was so clear, his words so unequivocal it's hard to understand how anyone could miss or skew the message. If we celebrated not just his *coming* to Earth, but his *living* on Earth — how he saw things — "*You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you*" (Matthew 5:21-22); how he treated people without judgment, without excluding, without anything but

mercy and acceptance — the world would look vastly different. How can anyone fail to see who he was and the example he set for our human living?

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>
> —Sr. Cheryl Rose
>
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This year, I am longing once again for the Messiah's coming, all too aware of the weight of darkness: of the shocking gun violence in our country, of the wrenching suffering of Ukraine and other places of staggering injustice, of lies and truth-spinning that have ignited hatred and division. And as I pray for the coming of the light, I'll also be thanking Jesus for entering our human experience and coaxing us to a new consciousness. Early on, he called us to come and follow him, telling us we could do all he did and more, inviting us to leave all the nonsense and walk on water with him. Let's pick up *our* incarnation.

Let's expand our incarnated selves to Jesus proportions! Advent is about incarnation — his and ours!



The meaning and challenge posed by the first Christmas, *by Sujata Jena, of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Mary and Jesus*

Since the first day of Advent, I have been reading, listening and reflecting on the mystery of God becoming human, the Immanuel "God with us"—the first Christmas!

I understand that Christmas is not about jingle bells, plum cakes, glittering costumes, sumptuous parties, or seven-star palaces. It is about the refugees and

migrants; the internally displaced; the struggle of Elizabeth to have a child; night watch shepherds; the martyrdom of innocent children; homeless wanderers; and daily wage laborers. For me, this is the true meaning of the Nativity of Christ, the first Christmas Day.

Christmas is a great feast not only for Christians but for the whole world, for humanity at large. Almost everyone celebrates Christmas, regardless of any differences: caste, creed or language. Unfortunately, today this great feast is commercialized, and the importance of the feast of God becoming human — and one among us to unite us in his love —is lost. It has become a mere social celebration.



Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus are depicted in a wooden creche at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, New York. (CNS/Catholic Courier/Mike Crupi)

I would like to reflect more on the deeper meaning of Christmas so that I may realize and be able to celebrate the coming Christmas in a meaningful way.

Today, it seems like the world is governed by a few powerful corporations, and a few crony capitalists control the world order and geopolitics. We find power struggles everywhere. Even in some families, there is a power struggle between husband and wife, parents and children, or brothers and sisters. In society, there are struggles between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, and the elite and the bourgeois. Even in some religious communities, there are power struggles among members.

Every nation wants to be powerful, which is one reason why we witness prolonged wars in some parts of the world. When power meets power, the outcome is a power struggle. When a powerful nation helps a poor nation, the outcome is alienation: The powerful nation looks upon the vulnerable as one who depends on them and subjugates them by meeting their needs and never allowing that nation to come into equal relationship. As a result, when power meets vulnerability, the outcome is alienation, separation and dependence.

However, when vulnerability meets vulnerability, the outcome is intimacy.

That's what we find in the birth of Jesus. God — so powerful, almighty and omniscient — meets the vulnerable human beings enslaved by the powerful. God comes down and becomes one among us to save and set us free — from every form of slavery and sin.

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—Sr. Sujata Jena

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That is why Christmas becomes a feast of vulnerability to experience freedom, dignity and the grace of God in and through Jesus. This feast invites us to become vulnerable, to join with the vulnerable. This is the entire message of Jesus.

Jesus is born in Bethlehem as a vulnerable, helpless baby. Mary and Joseph came to the stable when there was no place for them; Mary and Joseph gave birth to the child Jesus, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and placed him in the manger. God becomes vulnerable in meeting us who are weak.

Today, when we ask about the meaning of Christmas, many equate it with cakes, new dresses, toys and Santa Claus. This is how we destroy the real meaning of Christmas.



(Unsplash/James Coleman)

To understand the real meaning of Christmas, we need to reflect from the perspectives of those who were related to the first Christmas in history.

For God the Father, Christmas is *giving* as we find in the Scripture, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Hence, giving is Christmas. Today, the giving culture is slowly getting lost. We need to learn to give. …

So Christmas is giving, self-emptying, empowerment, self-surrender, obedience, simplicity, and humility: In short, it is the feast of vulnerability. God is compassionate. Compassion inspires justice, equality and fraternity. So let us learn to be one with the people who are helpless, downtrodden, rejected, neglected and poor. Let us take this message and celebrate this Christmas with its true meaning.

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Today in the context of war, corruption, exploitation, discrimination, rape, drug abuse, and broken families, the invitation is to listen intently to the heartbeat of God. We need to think like God and dream like God. Listening intently to the heartbeat of God and effectively living it in our daily lives will make Christmas a reality.

I pray that the virtues of the first Christmas guide my life as I accompany the vulnerable in an attempt to build his kingdom here on Earth.

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.