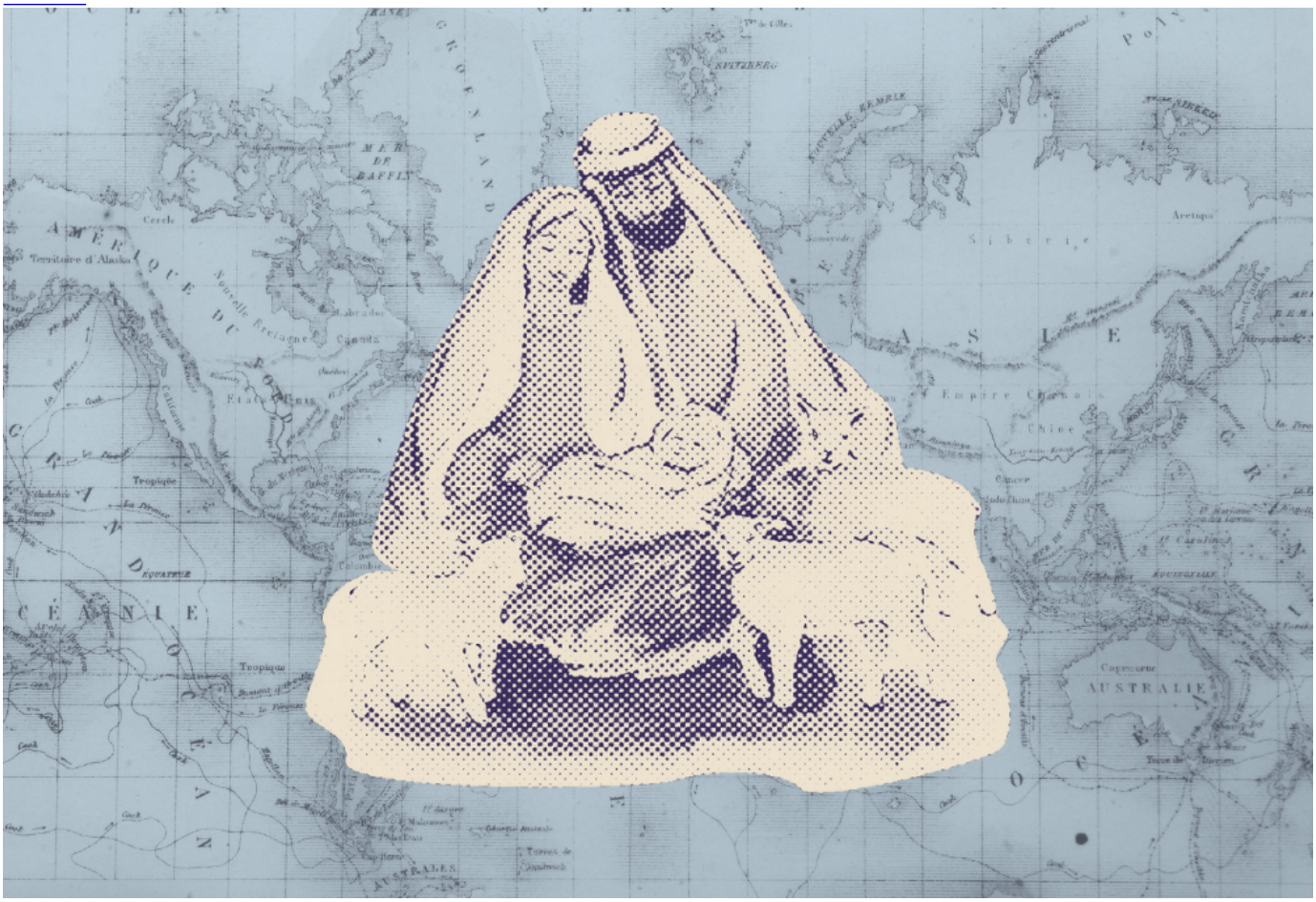


(GSR illustration/Olivia Bardo)



by Chris Herlinger

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In a world where wars, turbulence and insecurity rage in numerous locales, the Advent season is a time of stillness and contemplation, of silence and the hope for new birth.

"For those in the countries where there is war, and for all of us, this Advent is a call to trust in the promise of new life that is yet to unfold," said Good Shepherd Sr. Monique Tarabeh, who is originally from Damascus, Syria, and has been ministering in the United States for two years.

"The qualities of waiting, surrender and transformation mark this Advent," she said. "The silence of this season invites us to listen more deeply to God's voice, to trust in his timing and to find peace within the stillness. It is a sacred time to reflect on how we, too, can be bearers of Emmanuel — God with us, within us and beyond us."

Tarabeh added: "I am focusing on the 'silence moment.' How I can be waiting and embracing that silence, which can lead me to feel that, yes, I see a dark moment, but I'm hoping to see the light from the other end."



A rebel fighter guards the street in front of Lady of Damascus Church in Syria Dec. 11, 2024, after rebels seized the capital and ousted Syria's Bashar al-Assad. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Abdallah Dalsh)

This year's Advent season, Sr. Eucharia Madueke of Nigeria said, is marked "by ongoing wars and strife. It is clearly a time of spiritual warfare between good and evil, as well as a period of anticipation for the peace that only God can provide."

As a result, the Sister of Notre Dame de Namur said, "this season invites all of us to find ways, even in the smallest degrees, to contribute to spreading peace and joy … even in the most challenging situations."

Looking to the Gospel birth narratives, Philippine Sr. Mary Jane Caspillo, who represents the Medical Mission Sisters at the United Nations, points to the example of Joseph and Mary. "They made a decision to cross the path of uncertainty, and that's where new life begins — the fulfillment of the power of God. It's up to us now to participate in that promise of God."

Global Sisters Report recently asked more than a dozen sisters who minister throughout the world, including Tarabeh, Madueke and Caspillo, to share their thoughts on Advent. Some sisters were interviewed in person, others by Zoom, and others submitted written reflections. All spoke of a common theme: the welcome stillness and quiet of the season during a particularly challenging time in world history.

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At Advent, a welcome silence

Inspired by the courage and faith of the Syrian people, Tarabeh said hope is "a choice to believe in God's faithfulness. … Their lives reflect the peace and joy that come not from circumstances but from a deep trust in God's love and providence." She hopes Advent will lead all to a deeper silence and a similar surrender to God's will.

Sr. Jean Quinn, the executive director of the United Nations-based advocacy group UNANIMA, is also struck by the silence of the season — and the need for silence amid so many troubles. "I find it hard to watch the news," she said, citing wars or uprisings in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, Myanmar and Haiti, noting that there is "violence around all of us."

And as such, it is a time of year to ask "how to be on this journey with so much going on around us."

In these times, Quinn is returning to reading the Book of Lamentations as a reminder that as peacebuilders, sisters are "people of peace." But "the lamentation has to come first."



Sr. Jean Quinn (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Quinn is also returning to the birth narratives of Joseph and Mary on their way to Bethlehem — narratives of a homeless couple in which a sense of light and hope abides. Hope in particular, Quinn said, is an underlining element of the season. "We should be prisoners of hope," she said, quoting the late South African cleric Desmond Tutu.

At this time of year, "wisdom made flesh" is of particular importance as a Daughter of Wisdom, Quinn said. "The kind of birth and rebirth that happened 2,000 years ago, happens all the time, both in church and also in everyday life."

Quinn, who is Irish, added: "I always look for the places where I can find 'Wisdom made flesh.' "

Despite injustice, including "forms of violence against women, Indigenous peoples, children and the environment itself," Caspillo said, such "chaos can make us go deeper, finding hope in the midst of chaos.

"This is a particular need in Advent, as we stop and reflect and ask what is to be done now, personally, communally, globally. Jesus is the example — where there is healing, there is fullness of life. That is our Emmanual experience: that the spirit is alive, and that it is within us."



Bishop Honesto Ongtioco of Cubao, Philippines, celebrates the first of the nine-day dawn Mass known as “Misa de Gallo,” ahead of Christmas, at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral of Cubao in Manila Dec.16, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Lisa

Marie David)

Looking at the wider world, Caspillo said, it is important for sisters to feel a sense of connection to "the God within us."

"If I am able to connect to that spirituality, I have a sense of hope that I can make a difference, make the world a better place."



Sr. Yanuariya Isyk, a member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great whose ministry is based in the capital of Kyiv, is pictured in the chapel of a small monastery apartment shared with two other sisters. (GSR photo/Gregg Brekke)

In Ukraine, the hope of turning pain into joy

For the third year, Ukrainians are experiencing Advent amidst a full-scale invasion from Russia, said Sr. Yanuariya Isyk, a member of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great, writing from a monastery in Kyiv. In the capital city, snow and bracing cold now fill the air, as do air raid warnings, explosions and temporary power outages.

"Some are in the trenches on the front line, some in the rear under the threat of constant shelling, explosions, air raids, without light, without heat," Isyk wrote.

"When you wake up every morning with tears and go to bed every night with tears and sometimes it seems that it will never end." Still, despite these difficulties, "Ukraine knows that war is not only shelling, losses — it is also support, understanding, hope and faith.

"Advent gives us a powerful message of hope — God will turn our pain, our tears into joy. Maybe the world finds it hard to believe that our sadness will be removed and God will fill our lips with 'songs of joy.' "

Similarly, Sr. Veronika Yaniv, a Sister Catechist of St. Anne whose ministry is in Lviv, Ukraine, said that despite the ever-present reality of war, Christmas "is always a holiday of hope, when the Lord himself comes to man in the form of a small, defenseless child … who, in his weakness and trust in his Father, changes the course of history here on Earth, enhances the dignity of man, brings him freedom and opens the door to eternity with God.

"And so during this Advent, we again await with hope the coming of Christ, from whom we ask for the grace of freedom for every person, as well as for our Ukraine."



A Ukrainian woman who fled Russia's invasion of Ukraine prays with a rosary and prayers on her mobile phone in Lubaczow, Poland, March 21, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Kacper Pempel)

In Africa, 'a source of hope for humanity'

For Madueke, who is women's empowerment project coordinator for the Africa Faith and Justice Network, Advent represents "hope, expectation, and the promise of comfort," she said.

"As a sister, Advent provides me with more opportunities to do good beyond merely trying to reduce the evil in our world. It is four weeks of constant reminders that my existence is connected to others, offering a time for deeper prayerful reflection on the hope that Christ brings to the world."



Notre Dame de Namur Sr. Eucharia Madueke (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

For her and other sisters, gathering every night to light the Advent candles is a moment to give thanks, contemplate the hope and peace that Christ's arrival offers in our troubled world, and pray for those suffering from broken hearts, wars, violence, exploitation and all forms of abuse."

In Zambia, Sr. Angela Ngwenyufu, a member of the Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary, said that in awaiting the Messiah, "we are also called to cultivate peace and unity in our homes, communities, and workplaces."

A teacher at St. Patrick's Secondary Girls School in the capital city of Lusaka, Ngwenyufu said she plans to contribute to peace "by embodying it in my own actions," such as providing food and clothing through her parish to the incarcerated.



Sr. Eneless Chimbali, a senior program officer for the All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister, is pictured at the Imperial Botanical Beach Hotel April 10 in Entebbe, a town in central Uganda. (Doreen Ajiambo)

Sr. Eneless Chimbali of Malawi is a member of the Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She said the Advent season "gives us an opportunity to reflect on the second coming of Jesus and reminds us of the way it was during 'his first coming.' "

Chimbali, a senior program officer for the All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister, said the season "is truly a time of grace," though "it sometimes seems like peace is an unreachable goal, with conflicts continuing without any apparent effort to resolve them."

Chimbali said she finds herself considering the struggles "caused by war in various countries in Africa; places like Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan rarely receive attention, as if the world has grown weary of hearing about them. Political violence also permeates many regions, including Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon.

"As we anticipate the arrival of the Prince of Peace, we must ask: will he find peace in the world?"



Catholics attend a procession during the National Eucharistic Congress in Juba, South Sudan, Nov. 22, 2024, following a night of gunfire after security forces moved to arrest the former head of the intelligence service. (OSV News/Reuters/Samir Bol)

In Latin America, 'hope does not disappoint'

Ministering to vulnerable women in a suburban Buenos Aires shantytown, Passionist Sr. Florencia Buruchaga reflects on the past year under President Javier Milei, who — while garnering international praise for driving down inflation and not running a budget deficit — also dismantled many government programs.

Buruchaga described much of the president's program as painful, but "necessary," pointing, for example, to audits of social programs, which she said had intermediaries siphoning funds meant for the poor. She recognizes, however, that the depth of the cuts unsettled many and harmed some groups such as seniors,

whose pensions were not indexed to match inflation.

Still, Buruchaga also expresses some optimism for 2025, echoing the sentiments of many Argentines, who endured Milei's promised economic pain with the hope of escaping the country's recurring crises. "[People] don't want to go back to what we had before," she said.

> "As we anticipate the arrival of the Prince of Peace, we must ask: will he find peace in the world?"
>
> — Sr. Eneless Chimbali
>
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Given strife at home and abroad, Buruchaga said, "Advent brings us closer to the image of a fragile child that only men and women who are hungry and thirsty for justice and work for peace in this world can recognize."

The birth of the Christ child is itself a message, she said, "which opens a path through the cracks" of an impenetrable system marked by conflict and injustice.

"This is the path of the brave, of those who have nothing to lose, who travel with the certainty of having been witnesses and chosen by the one who announces peace. They are those who can sing with the angels and the shepherds: 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on Earth!' "

Another new Latin American head of state has its citizens ambivalent yet hopeful: Mexico inaugurated its first female president in 2024 with Claudia Sheinbaum taking office in October.

Though opinion polls find citizens initially satisfied with the new president's administration, Oblate Sr. Carmen Ugarte García expresses concern over challenges such as rampant violence; the growing reach of criminal groups; and "the caravans of migrants advancing amid uncertainty and abandonment in the face of threats from the next president of the United States."



Pilgrims walk toward the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City Dec. 11, 2024, to participate in her Dec. 12 feast day celebrations. (OSV News/Reuters/Quetzalli Nicte-Ha)

"All of this fractures relationships, increases indifference and dehumanization, and the pain of millions of brothers and sisters cries out to heaven," said Ugarte, who is based in the border city of Ciudad Juárez.

Ugarte finds hope amid the discouragement.

"In these circumstances, hope arises as a need to continue believing that something new will come, that these situations of death cannot and should not have the last word, because 'Hope does not disappoint,' " she said.

"This blessed motto chosen for the Jubilee 2025 mobilizes our spirit and encourages us to trust. As Christians, we will have an entire year to carry this out and become stronger. We are invited to be sowers and pilgrims of hope."



Sr. Maria Nirmalini, the superior general of the Apostolic Carmel sisters (Thomas Scaria)

In India, challenges but living with joy

"There is still a sacredness of waiting and a ray of hope amidst war, conflicts and hatred," said Sr. Maria Nirmalini, who heads the Apostolic Carmel congregation and India's more than 100,000 Catholic sisters.

She said those who seek immediate solutions to problems may avoid trouble and the pain emanating from problematic situations.

But that ignores certain truths. "It is not just patience that we lack, but the sacredness of waiting," she told GSR, adding "not that we just wait for Jesus, but God is waiting for us, too, from a very risky situation of a desperate and war-torn world."

Salesian Sr. Roni Elizabeth from Manipur, a strife-ridden state in northeastern India, said Christmas is the only ray of hope as her community has faced ethnic clashes for one and a half years, with the situation worsening each day.

> "There is still a sacredness of waiting and a ray of hope amidst war, conflicts and hatred."

— Sr. Maria Nirmalini

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Amidst this chaos, the Advent season "brings us hope. Like the star guiding the wise men to Bethlehem, we pray that the light of peace will lead us to unity, comfort and lasting peace," she told GSR.

Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Sr. Christina Fernandes, who serves the social work department of the Catholic Diocese of Karwar, India, said Christmas is a time to experience God's powerful presence amid turmoil, disasters and struggles in life.

"For me, Advent is a time of hope to focus not on despair but on the light that dispels darkness," she added.

Medical Mission Sr. Joan Chunkapura said she experiences Christmas every day as she accompanies hundreds of addicts towards hope, peace and joy.

"The addicts live in utter hopelessness, but my ministry is to lead them to hope, and it is an experience of Christmas all-throughout," she added.

Sr. Blanch Ancintha Rosario of the Canossian Daughters of Charity who heads the Sister Doctors Forum of India, said the Advent season is a call to renew "our commitment to hope, which is not based on worldly circumstances but on the unshakable foundation of God's love and presence."

"Advent," Rosario said, reminds us "of the urgency to bring light to a world in darkness.

"Just as Jesus did."

Africa and Middle East correspondent Doreen Ajiambo and freelancers David Agren in Mexico and Thomas Scaria in India contributed to this report.

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