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An Advent wreath is depicted in a stained-glass window at Christ the King Church in Commack, New York. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

by The Life Panelists

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Welcome to the ninth year of The Life. This year, our new panel includes sisters from many countries—India, Zimbabwe, the U.S., Ireland, Nigeria, and more—bringing a wide range of experiences and ministries.

Our panelists have served as teachers, counselors, health care workers, social workers, writers, and advocates. Some work closely with vulnerable communities, including those who are LGBTQIA+, migrants, and survivors of human trafficking. Meet all of the new panelists here.

Together, they will share personal reflections on spirituality, faith and the challenges of our world today. Their responses will enrich our understanding of "the life" God has called them to.

Read the responses of this month's panelists to the prompt:

Drawing from your experiences and the world around you, share a reflection or meditation on the theme of Advent.



Sr. Agnes Rungsung, a member of the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, hails from a remote village in Manipur, northeastern India where Catholics are a minority. Despite facing humiliation from peers

and teachers for her faith, these trials deepened her love for the Catholic Church and led her to seek its truth more fervently. Now holding a licentiate in Biblical theology, she teaches in formation houses and preaches retreats to laypeople, clergy and religious. An emerging writer and theologian, she is currently preparing for her doctoral studies abroad, continuing her mission to evangelize through intellect and faith.

The season of Advent is universally a summons to quiet vigilance, a holy pause to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Yet, for the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament working among the simple, hardworking villagers of northeast India, Advent transcends mere reflection; it becomes an active, lived expression of hopeful service.



Sisters Elizabeth Soreng and Anita of the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament visit families in Jakhalabandha, Assam, India, on Nov. 10, 2025. (Courtesy of Sr. Elizabeth Soreng)

In the spirit of our founder's (Venerable Bishop Thomas Kurialacherry) pastoral call, we recognize that the Advent waiting is most potent in the places of deepest need. For many families in the remote villages of this part of India, life is marked by the "long night" — the darkness of illiteracy, economic marginalization, and the quiet despair that comes from lack of access and opportunity. The sisters, steeped in their

charism, understand this long night not just as a sociological reality, but as the very setting where Christ is most eager to be born anew. They embody the words that urge us to illuminate the lives of those dwelling in the shadows.

Our preparation is therefore twofold, merging prayer with action. The spiritual core remains the quiet hour spent before the Blessed Sacrament — the adoration that fuels the mission. This silent vigilance is the wellspring from which the sisters draw the strength to face the arduous tasks of the day. It is here they realize that they are not just bringing God to the people, but helping the people recognize the divine already residing within their struggles and resilience.

> 'We wait in joyful hope, but our hands are busy building his kingdom here on Earth.'
>
> —Sr. Agnes Rungsung
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The visible expression of this waiting is found in the dirt roads they walk daily. When Advent wreaths are being lit globally, here, the sisters are lighting the lamps of education in village schools, the flame of dignity in women's empowerment groups, and the spark of health in remote dispensaries. Every lesson taught, every wound dressed, and every act of advocacy for land rights or justice is a practical step of preparation — a concrete effort to straighten the paths and smooth the rough ways for the Lord's arrival into the hearts of the marginalized.

Advent in northeast India, therefore, is not about lavish decoration; it is about deeper dedication. It is a continuous, living sacrifice that seeks to elevate the human person, making the villagers true beneficiaries of Christ's light. It reminds us that the promise of Christmas is fulfilled not in our comfort, but in our commitment to be the visible sign of God's love, echoing the founder's deep-seated faith in the power of service to transform society. We wait in joyful hope, but our hands are busy building his kingdom here on Earth.



Sr. Deirdre Mc Kenna is a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, an international congregation, and is based in the North of Ireland. She qualified as a fully licensed social worker in 1990 and has specialized in the area of palliative and end of life care for the past 17 years. She is author of the recently published, *When There Are Few Words: Exploring some of the questions that might arise for you, or someone close to you, at end of life*. Alongside her formal ministry, she is currently working on her second book.

Advent always feels like a holy pause for me — a chance to breathe more deeply, to watch, to wait; a time of anticipation and an invitation to trust the promise of Emmanuel, God with us.

Here in Ireland, Advent unfolds against the backdrop of long, damp evenings, when the winds whistle and rattle around our windows and the land lies bare and resting. The fields are stripped back, hedges are sparse, and the skies hang low with winter light. In our cultural memory, this is the time of year when people once gathered close around the hearth, sharing stories and songs to keep the darkness at bay. That same instinct lingers still; we gather ourselves in, we light our candles and we pray. Advent in Ireland carries the rhythm of the natural season: a quiet waiting, a leaning into the dark with the trust that spring will come again, and with it, new life.



"Advent always feels like a holy pause for me — a chance to breathe more deeply, to watch, to wait; a time of anticipation and an invitation to trust the promise of Emmanuel, God with us": Deirdre Mc Kenna took this photo at Craigavon Lakes in Craigavon, Northern Ireland, in November 2025. (Deirdre Mc Kenna)

Living in Advent teaches me to wait, and waiting has never been easy! Our world urges us to hurry, to solve, to produce instant answers through our hurried Google searches. In Advent we remember the beauty of something less instantaneous, something gentler — that something of true value is worthy of a waiting time, a watching time, a trusting time.

In a world awash with information, a poverty of knowledge grows and strains for meaning. The invitation to wait in Advent offers an opportunity for us to slow the flow and allow ourselves to create and hold a space for meaning making. To "chew the cud" and ponder in our hearts as Mary did, what hope may lie in trusting.

In our congregation, we usually pray our way through a simple, common Advent ritual of readings, reflections and sharings. Our women gather in small cluster community groups or as individuals joining with others in spirit.

Sometimes, flowing from our gatherings, we undertake small acts of generosity or kindness. These often aren't dramatic, but they are, we believe, how Christ's light is born in us day by day. We notice again how even the smallest flame pushes back the dark. We trust that God is always coming toward us, here and now, in ways we might not expect.



Sr. Erin Zubal, an Ursuline Sister of Cleveland, is chief of staff at Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice. In this role, she leads internal coordination and integration of teams and operations to advance Network's mission. Zubal is the first person to serve in this position and brings a depth of knowledge and experience in education, social work and public policy to the role. She served for 15 years as a social worker and educator in Catholic elementary and high schools in the Diocese of Cleveland. She holds a master's in social work administration from Case Western Reserve University and a master's in educational administration from Ursuline College.

No matter how many candles we light, no matter how many presents we might wrap, no matter how eagerly we anticipate the baby Jesus arriving, we cannot deny that the backdrop for this joyful season of preparation is the encroaching cold of winter. God shows up to transform a world that is increasingly cold and bleak.

In my community, the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland, this also reminds us that there are fewer of us than there were this time last year and that the holy waiting of Advent takes on poignant meaning. This is especially true for communities facing fulfillment in the coming decades. But we know that is only part of the story.

We have educated thousands and taken care of the sick and dying, accompanied people battling addiction, and helped shelter the unhoused. We have served with distinction from El Salvador to Cleveland. And every stop along the way, our sisters have laid down their lives, sacrificed all for the people of God.



Sr. Erin Zubal, far left, poses with many of her sisters at an event honoring Sr. Susan Zion for her hard work and commitment to ministry. Zion, fifth from the right, front row, was inducted into Villa Angela-St Joseph High School's Hall of Fame at Villa Angela-St Joseph High School, Cleveland, Ohio, April 22, 2023. You can always count on the Ursulines to show up for each other, Sister Erin writes. (Courtesy of Erin Zubal)

As women religious strive to join our lives to Jesus, communities facing fulfillment should, with God's grace, live into the future with serenity, with the knowledge that we have been true to our mission, seeking to transform the world through our charisms, mission and witness of our lives.

When people have lacked the warmth of the sun in the dead of winter, our ministries have brought a fire to the world. And even when it appears that the fires are going out, amid a crumbling democracy, a broken church, and the loss of so many sisters, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister invites us to look deeper: "*There is great fire in these ashes. All we need to do to fan the flame is to embrace the moment.*"

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Just as Advent does not merely mark events consigned to the past, our ministries — carried by the Spirit — transcend the present moment and our earthly presence. We have faith that others will stir the embers after we are gone. We look to a horizon where our colleagues and collaborators who know us and love us will carry our charisms long into the future.

Each season brings its own gifts, whether the work of faithful sisters or dedicated laypeople. As we decrease, they must increase. This is the visible sign of the Incarnation we anticipate this season: the transformative power of God alive in the whole body of Christ.



Sr. Kum Shallotte Bi is a member of the Holy Union Sisters, an international religious congregation. She began her ministry as a teacher of mathematics and religious studies in secondary school before pursuing a career in nursing, driven by a deep passion for healing and compassionate care. Over the years, she has gained experience in leadership and clinical practice across maternity, surgical, medical and emergency units. She currently serves as a nurse anesthetist and head of a health facility in Baba I, a rural, conflict-affected area of Cameroon. Her mission focuses on improving maternal and child health through community empowerment, advocacy and enhanced service delivery.

Advent is a season of waiting, longing and preparing for the coming of Christ who is our peace and security. For me, serving as a Holy Union Sister in a rural conflict-affected part of Cameroon, Advent feels deeply real. It resonates with the daily reality of a community waiting for peace, safety or healing. For the assurance that life can once again flourish.

Each year as we light the Advent candles in my community, I am reminded that one candle is enough to pierce the darkness. The flicker of hope it represents speaks powerfully in a place where many live with fear and limited access to health care, education and clean water. When mothers wait to deliver children in poorly resourced maternity wards, I see in their faces the same longing Mary carried as she awaited the birth of Christ; in an expectant hope mixed with uncertainty.

Advent unfolds for me through the simple yet profound acts of solidarities in the community. Neighbors share the little food they have, women gather to support each other in childbirth and youth sing hymns of hope in churches despite the instability around them. These are signs of Advent, small yet radiant glimpses of God's presence breaking into fragile realities.



(Unsplash/Robert Thiemann)

My ministry as a nurse anesthetist and health facility leader has shown me that Advent is not only about waiting but also about preparing the way. Each intervention to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality, each effort to secure clean water, and each initiative to empower women are modern ways of making the paths straight for the coming of Christ. In every act of care and advocacy, I experience Advent as both a promise and a responsibility.

The season challenges me to hold together faith and action along with waiting and working. Advent assures us that God is faithful and will come. It also asks us to be light bearers, to kindle hope where despair threatens to overwhelm. In a world marked by conflict, division and suffering, the message of Advent is profoundly countercultural. It declares that joy, peace, love and hope are still possible.

As I walk with my community through this season, I am convinced that Advent is not only the period of preparation for Christmas but also a call to live daily with expectant hearts. To nurture hope in fragile places and to believe that God who came as a child continues to be born among us bringing light no darkness can overcome.



Sr. Sherly Thomas, far right, joined vulnerable community members in a public rally advocating for the protection of women and girls on Women's Day, March 8, 2025, in Bangalore, India. Participants called for justice and stronger action against exploitation and gender-based violence. (Courtesy of Sr. Sherly Thomas)



Sr. Sherly Thomas, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Lyon, was born in Kerala, India. Deeply committed to the mission of justice, peace and care for creation, she has dedicated her life to empowering marginalized communities through education, livelihood initiatives and social awareness programs. Her ministry includes accompanying the vulnerable — migrants, scavengers (caste-based sanitation workers), LGBTQ individuals, and

survivors of human trafficking — toward dignity and self-reliance. Rooted in the Gospel and inspired by the charism of her congregation, Thomas strives to build inclusive communities where love and compassion transform lives.

Advent is a season that calls us to wait, to prepare and to hope. It is not a passive waiting, but an active one — longing for a new dawn while working to bring it closer. In my ministry with justice, peace and integrity of creation, I have learned that this Advent spirit is lived most authentically in the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities.

Among the scavenger families we support (caste-based sanitation workers), waiting takes the form of perseverance against daily rejection and stigma. These families, often forced into degrading work, dare to dream of better opportunities. Through livelihood programs and educational support, we accompany them in their hope for a life of dignity. Every small step — a child going to school, a woman starting a small business — becomes a sign of Advent. It is the light of possibility flickering in the midst of darkness, showing that change is possible when people are empowered.

I also think of the LGBTQ community, whose cry for acceptance and equality resonates with the Advent longing for God's justice. Many of them have faced exclusion even from their families, yet they remain courageous in asserting their right to live with dignity. Walking alongside them is an Advent journey of widening our hearts, of making space for Christ who comes to us through the vulnerable and the excluded. Their resilience is a testimony that waiting is not despair, but hope in action.



On World Day Against Human Trafficking, July 30, 2025, Sr. Sherly Thomas led an awareness program in Bangalore with sisters from multiple congregations. Activists, community leaders and faith groups gathered to address exploitation and empower vulnerable communities. (Courtesy of Sr. Sherly Thomas)

The issue of human trafficking further deepens this Advent call. Trafficked persons long for freedom, restoration and a community that will see them not as commodities but as human beings created in the image of God. In awareness campaigns, advocacy and livelihood support for at-risk groups, I see echoes of John the Baptist's call to "prepare the way of the Lord." Clearing rough paths today means dismantling systems of exploitation and building communities of protection, solidarity and justice.

Advent, therefore, is not confined to liturgical rituals or traditions — it is a social and spiritual summons. It urges us to recognize God's presence in the cries of the poor and to become bearers of hope through concrete action. As we light the Advent candles, we are reminded that our world still waits for justice, inclusion and peace. The season invites us not only to wait for Christ's coming but also to prepare the world where his presence can be recognized — in the dignity restored, the excluded embraced, and the oppressed set free.

This story appears in the **The Life** and **Advent** feature series.