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Celebrating the 15 days of Christmas

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This is where the church got it right: the season of Christmas (roughly 12 days) lasts for 15 days this year. This season overflows with celebration -- from the birth of Christ to the inspiration of martyrs and holy people. In the fashion of *My Life with the Saints* by Jesuit Fr. James Martin, the following is a reflection of the Christmas season through the lives and events of inspiration that we celebrate. Take some time each day to contemplate your life within the bigger picture of Christmas.

Day 1: Nativity of Christ
The birth of God's only son who came to offer light in the darkness, freedom to those oppressed and reconciliation to a broken world. Born in a manger and born along a journey, Christ is God's promise to those born vulnerable on the margins of society.

How does Christ's birth affect the way you express care to the least of these? Consider sharing your home with those in need so that others may never experience "no room in the inn."

Day 2: Feast of St. Stephen, first martyr
The apostles appointed seven people to especially care for widows and the poor. Stephen was gifted with wisdom and words. St. Stephen was one of the first deacons of the early Christian church. His preaching of the Good News inspired many to be followers of Jesus.

Is there a widow or widower in your church or community who could use a friend? Consider offering the ministry of presence and companionship to those who have experienced loss in this last year.

Day 3: Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist
The fourth Gospel, three Epistles and the Apocalypse are all attributed to the Evangelist. The Apostle was present at the transfiguration of Christ, the Last Supper, His agony in the garden, and His crucifixion and death. Before John died, he was known to preach these simple words to his disciples: "My dear children, love one another."

Be inspired and read a few poetic excerpts by St. John. Behave in a way that takes his words seriously: "Love one another."

Day 4: Holy innocents, martyrs
The wise men sent to find baby Jesus returned to their lands through alternative routes because they received a warning in a dream not to return to King Herod. Upset, King Herod proceeded to kill approximately 14,000 newborn male babies in search of the Christ child. Jesus, Mary and Joseph went to Egypt during this time and returned to Israel after King Herod died.

Take a moment to consider your own participation in caring for young lives in your community. Make a donation to a local nonprofit that cares for the welfare of children.

Day 5: Christmas
Calculate how much you spent on Christmas decorations. Donate that same amount to your local homeless shelter.

Day 6: Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
The aged, humble Joseph who loved and protected his wife and child whose death was hidden to most of us; the young and trusting Mary whose affirmation allowed for God's will to penetrate the darkness of human sin with hope; and Jesus, the child who bore great suffering after demonstrating ways to live for God and for others.

How can you begin to practice great trust in God as Joseph, Mary and Jesus did? Ask for the grace to be aware of those moments of paralyzing fear so that you can say Yes! to God's impossible possibility.

Day 7: Christmas
Calculate how much you spent on Christmas presents for one loved one. Donate that same amount to a women and children's shelter.

Day 8: Nativity of the Lord Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God
Does Mary offer you a window into who God is? How does this daughter, cousin, wife, mother accompany you during this Christmas season? What women in your community resemble the Mary who "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart?"

Day 9: Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzen, bishops and doctors of the church
In the 4th century, St. Basil was known to have set down rules for a monastic way of life that Eastern monks still follow today. St. Gregory was regarded as "The Theologian" because of his gift of learning and skillful oratory. Both offer examples of the wisdom the church receives and cultivates in bishops, or shepherds of the church and doctors, or theologians of the church.

What rule do you live by? Who are the people that offer you words of truth and encouragement? Consider spending time with people who can use a good word of support and encouragement.

Day 10: Christmas
Calculate how much money you spent on presents to children this year. Donate that same amount to a nonprofit specializing in children's foster care.

Day 11: Memorial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Religious
Mother Seton joined the Catholic church at the age of 31 and became America's first native-born saint when she was canonized in 1975. Having been married and widowed, Mother Seton persisted in accepting graciously God's will for her life ("The Will," as she referred to it). By 1818, Mother Seton had begun a sisterhood based on the Rule of St. Vincent de Paul and opened up two schools and an orphanage.

How have you come to understand "The Will" of God active in your life? Are you open to it or closed? Spend some time researching a few local schools. Consider donating your time or your treasure to these places.

Day 12: Memorial of St. John Neumann, bishop
St. John Neumann founded the first Catholic diocesan school system in Philadelphia as bishop and Redemptorist missionary. He is known to be the Immigrant Bishop because he could relate to immigrants, he himself being one from Bohemia, sent to America to minister to German-speaking immigrants. He became a Redemptorist and followed the example of Jesus and continued to announce good news to the poor. Popular devotion to St. John Nuemann continues at his shrine in Philadelphia.

Consider how you built your own life here in the United States. Attend a Mass or festival celebrating a culture different from yours. Donate to a cause that is important to their community.

Day 14: Christmas
Calculate how much money you spent on food for the holidays. Divide that number by 10. Spend those many hours feeding the hungry throughout this year.

Day 15: The Epiphany of the Lord
Epiphany comes from the Greek verb meaning "to reveal." The celebration of the Epiphany has changed over time and throughout the world. Traditionally, we celebrate the exchange of gifts on this day just as the wise men offered gifts to the newborn Christ. In this way, Christ continues to reveal himself to humanity.

How can you continue to embody Christ in our world? Consider a year full of Christmas moments that include many Epiphanies for you, your loved ones, and for all those you have yet to meet.

And let us all be inspired by the words of Howard Thurman as this Christmas Season comes to a close:

The Work of Christmas
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins.
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner,
To teach the nations,
To bring Christ to all,
To make music in the heart.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit contemplativesinaction.org [1] for more information.]

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