



*Christmas at the Convent:*

STORIES OF  
CHRISTMAS PAST

*Sr. Agnes Thérèse*



For most of us, Christmas is associated with lots of memories: family traditions and dramas, gifts and losses, and the unique combination of stress and relaxation that accompanies our annual remembrance of Christ's birth. It's similar for us here at the convent!

CHRISTMAS WITH THE FAMILY



*"Christmas at the monastery is very focused on relationship—relationship with God and with one another." ~ Sr. Miriam*

One of my most precious Christmas memories is from my time at Heart of Mary, our mission house in downtown Steubenville. Although mission houses in the area traditionally spend Christmas day at the Motherhouse, we decided to spend that Christmas with our downtown family instead. So, we went to the Greek Orthodox Church, which hosted a free meal for any and all, and then we went caroling through the projects (government housing) downtown. We literally went door to door, knocking and offering to sing to people. I was pretty nervous starting out, not knowing how we would be received, but the families who came to the doors were universally delighted. Many took pictures, and several

exclaimed, "Nobody's ever sung to me before!" It was beautiful. We brought with us some toys that had been left over from our gift giveaway in past years and at each house with kids, we asked the parents (as discreetly as we could!) if we could give their children a gift. There was evidence of a pretty sparse Christmas in many of the homes we stopped at that day, and most of the time our offer was enthusiastically received. As our house shared together about our experience at the end of the day, cold from being out in the frigid wintry weather and exhausted from singing and walking and lugging gifts around, we were all so happy, beyond what words could express, that we had been able to spend Christmas with our family, the people entrusted to us at that time in our lives.

THE PERFECT TEAM: DECORATING DONE RIGHT



*"We wait to decorate for Christmas as long as we can...It's about preparing our hearts for Christ's coming, bringing ourselves into the quietness of Mary and Joseph and Jesus. We get down to what it's really about: reflecting upon His great love for us." ~ Sr. Chiara Joan*

Like most families, decorating our home is an important part of preparing for Christmas. We typically pick an evening close to December 17 (when the beautiful “O Antiphons” are sung at Evening Prayer) to decorate. Unlike most families, our home is shared by as many as 22 women who all have different tastes in decoration and different levels of perfectionism! To help smooth over the tension that can sometimes accompany decoration, we usually listen to Christmas music as we decorate and have one sister assigned to refreshments, bringing cocoa and cookies around to the other sisters as they fuss about garland and try to assemble the (sometimes broken) Christmas tree and find lights that work.

But my last year at Heart of Mary we had the perfect decoration team! Sr. Monica and Sr. Katherine, both of whom are artistic and have an eye for decoration, each took a major room in the house (the chapel and the main sitting room). Sr. Maria Clare helped Sr. Monica. Sr. Rita Clare, who loves adventure, wanted to put out some lights outside. That left me! Frankly, I can’t really be trusted with delicate decorative tasks. So what was I to do? I hauled up the boxes of decorations from the basement, listened to Neil Diamond’s Christmas CD, ate cookies, and found an extension cord for Sr. Rita Clare. It was the best Christmas decoration party ever!



*"Sisters are at their most sneaky during the Advent Season! We pick names out of a hat before Advent begins and the sister that we pick is the sister that we pray for during the following year. We also decorate her bedroom door during Advent and make her a homemade gift for Christmas. There is a lot of fun in guessing which sister has who, especially on Christmas day when all is revealed." ~Sr. Miriam*

One final tradition we have in community is that of drawing “Advent Angels.” Each year, we pick the name of another sister in our house, and during Advent we pray for her and typically decorate her door. Then, at Christmas, we guess who our Advent Angel is, and she gives us a card with a promise for prayers in the coming year and oftentimes some sort of homemade gift (like “coupons” for time together or help with a project). It is hilarious to see the ways that sisters try to hide their identity as they go about decorating doors in Advent—some will try to get decorations up before other sisters make it into the hallways in the morning. Others enlist the help of sisters from other houses. Personally, I don’t have the energy or creativity to partake of such subterfuge, so I simply wait in great fear for the moment when the sister whose “AA” I am reveals to me that she knows it’s me—and one time this occurred the evening BEFORE the first Sunday of Advent!

~ SR. AGNES THÉRÈSE DAVIS, T.O.R.

*"One of the things I love is that we celebrate Christmas as an octave...In a family, there's the anticipation up to when the baby is born. Then when the baby is born, there's this celebration that's prolonged. Here in community, we celebrate Jesus' birth like that—celebrating with the same excitement from Christmas Day all the way to New Year's."*  
~Sr. June Benedicta

*"I'm considered an "alien" because I am not a US citizen. Some sisters take great enjoyment in teasing me about this. One year, Sr. Mary Markita created a booklet which contained a very witty, made-up story all about my alien status. It included hilarious photos that she had taken around the Motherhouse. I saved the booklet and re-read it when I'm having a rough day!"*  
~Sr. Miriam

*"We do little skits for each other. One year as novices we did a skit on St. Nicholas. We made a house constructed out of cardboard. One sister played St. Nicholas and the rest of us had multiple parts in the skit because there weren't enough of us. It was hilarious. We had the sisters crying, they were laughing so hard! That's one of my best memories."*  
~Sr. Chiara Joan

*I've been in charge of the kitchen the past couple of years wherever I have been living, and, as all of you moms out there know, there's a lot to do around the holidays. What I've been trying to do lately is to put myself with Mary in the busyness, mess and stress of going to a different place, trying to provide for a family, taking care of things for people in an inconvenient situation, and finding my peace in the middle of the chaos." ~ Sr. Agnes Thérèse*

# SISTER SPOTLIGHT: *Sr. Teresa Reyes, T.O.R.*

**Name**—*Sr. Teresa Reyes, T.O.R.*

**City, State**—*Passaic, New Jersey*

**Home Parish**—*St. Anthony of Padua*

**Years in the Community**—*Just over 6 years*

## **What do you do in the community?**

*I'm the ministry coordinator, which means I get all kinds of ministry requests—anything from a presentation for children, to a talk at a parish, to a vocation talk at a high school. I discern which requests we can accommodate and find a sister who has the availability and gifts for that particular ministry. I'm also the vehicle coordinator, which means I have the responsibility to make sure the Motherhouse cars are well-maintained.*

## **Is there a Bible passage or quote you have been reflecting over lately?**

*I recently read Michael D. O'Brien's Sophia House. In it, the main character has a dream in which Jesus appears to him with light beautifully emanating from His wounds. Referring to the devil, Jesus says to the main character, "That one made wounds in My body, and now he is afraid of them. With these, I will conquer." It really struck me because so often God conquers in us through our wounds. He takes our brokenness and infuses it with His very self, transforming it so as to bring about something far greater, far better, far more beautiful, precisely through our brokenness, not in spite of it.*

## **Describe a recent "God-incident" in your life.**

*I was praying with someone a few months ago, and I received an image that was very particular and kind of graphic of Christ and His passion. I felt moved to share that particular image with him. I found out afterwards that he had actually been praying with the image that I had described to him in detail as he was walking up to receive prayer ministry. So for him it was very much a confirmation of, 'Yes, the Lord is at work in this because I had this image in my heart, and sister just spoke that*

*same image back to me in more detail.' Revealing what was in this man's heart through that image in prayer was a particular way that God was loving this individual and saying to him, "I hold you close to My heart. You're in My heart..." It's just amazing how God shows up in us frail, weak vessels and uses us to reveal His merciful love to others.*

## **What is your family like?**

*I am the youngest of three children. Fun fact about my family: both of my grandmothers gave birth to at least ten children each and I have about 65 first cousins. Both of my parents were born in the Dominican Republic. We had big family vacations there. We just loved it. We'd go to the beach or to the river with tons of cousins to play with. Some of my parents' siblings have gone back to the Dominican Republic for retirement, but the overwhelming majority of them are here in the States. My dad's side is still mostly in New Jersey. My mom's siblings are all nearby, within a 10-15 minute drive, and my siblings are in Passaic also.*

## **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

*When I was growing up, religious life was not on my radar at all. Sometimes people think that those who end up in religious life are those who wanted to do it from the time they were young, but that is not always the case. I didn't start seriously thinking about religious life until I was in college. When I first started considering it, my biggest fear was that God couldn't truly satisfy the deepest desires of my heart. Could I possibly be happy as a sister? I had all these ideas of what I was going to do when I grew up with marriage and family life and all of that. The life of chastity, poverty, and obedience is just so counter-cultural. What really convinced me was coming to the point of recognizing that God truly could fulfill the deep desires of my heart that I had for love, for happiness, for peace, for joy, for a deep relationship. I discovered that one doesn't enter the convent to be mopey and sad for the rest of one's life and that it's not just a life of service. It's about relationship. It's being in love with Jesus and being His spouse. It's a life of motherhood, sacrifice and being given in love.*



*Sr. Teresa (left) walks with Sr. Anna Rose on the monastery grounds last June after picking cherries.*

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Sr. Anna Rose in action in the Motherhouse fitness room.

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