

December 9, 2009

Dear Fr. John,

Advent greetings to you from New York! I have the privilege of having two "letter-writing days" in a row this week to send out Christmas cards. Lo and behold, today turned out to be a great day to stay inside and write letters—it's cold, windy, and rainy outside, so there's not too much temptation to go outside for our fairly-regular recreational walk around the neighborhood, to the cemetery or the trails nearby (two beautiful places to walk), or to the park to play tennis or basketball. We all thought that the weather has been very providential lately. Today, we want to stay inside and write letters and it's rainy. Yesterday, it was sunny, which was great: to celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception we were surprised with a trip into Manhattan to go ice skating at Bryant Park with all of the sisters in the novitiate. Let me tell you, it was quite a sight to see nearly 25 postulants and fully-habited sisters zooming & twirling around on the ice, veils streaming and skirts billowing. The generous manager allowed us to go for free and We had a great time. Afterward, we walked by St. Patrick's Cathedral and Rockefeller Center to see the giant Christmas tree.

The busy hustle & bustle of Manhattan during the "holiday season" was almost palpable in the City yesterday, which made me all the more grateful for the season of Advent in which we find ourselves. Thank God that the Church, in her wisdom, knows that two-and-a-half months of Christmas (and externally preparing for Christmas with shopping, decorating, wrapping, etc.) isn't good for our blood pressure. Advent is a beautiful season in the convent. I already knew Advent was a beautiful season, but it can sometimes be hard to remember that it exists in the craziness of final exams or the constant bombardment with Christmas songs and advertisements starting on Nov. 1".

As we began the Advent, Sr. Charlotte (our postulant director) gave us postulants a beautiful reflection. As Sisters of Life and particularly as postulants in "formation", Advent is *our season*, in a special way. It is a time of silent waiting and expectation, a time when we cultivate silent, perhaps unseen growth, like a seed underground or a baby in the womb. During Advent, we wait with Mary, who quietly and simply nourished the growth of the baby Jesus within her for nine months. Can you imagine with what anticipation she awaited his birth, this Child who was being formed from her own flesh? And we wait for Christ as she does—he is being formed within us too (all of us, not just us hopefully-soon-to-be-sisters). We joyously await his coming, not only at Christmas, but every day of our lives, sometimes in the most normal and mundane circumstances of our lives. As Caryl Houselander eloquently puts it in *The Reed of God*, "Working, eating, sleeping, she was forming His body from hers. His flesh and blood. From her humanity, she gave Him His humanity... Every beat of her heart gave Him His heart to love with, His heart to be broken by love. All of her experience of the world about her was gathered to Christ growing in her. If we have truly given our humanity to be changed into Christ, it is essential to us that we do not disturb this time of growth... In the seasons of our Advent—waking, working, eating, sleeping, being—each breath is a breathing of Christ into the world."

On that note, I would like to highly recommend the book *The Reed of God*, by Caryl Houselander. It is a *beautiful* reflection on Mary and on the Incarnation. In the convent, we have the practice of reading aloud during some of our meals. We've been reading *The Reed of God* during Advent and I love it. I think it would also be a wonderful book to use for prayer.

And this gives me an idea—since I can't give you all Christmas presents, I thought I'd include a list of recommended books that I *would* give you as a present if I *could*. So your present, instead, is the recommendation. ☺ 1) *The Reed of God*, by Caryl Houselander; 2) *He Leadeth Me*, by Fr. Walter Cizek, SJ (I highly, highly recommend this one, too—spiritual lessons learned during his 17+ years of imprisonment & solitary confinement in Soviet prisons and labor camps. *Very good*); 3) *Maurice & Therese*, by Patrick Ahern (a book of the correspondence between a struggling seminarian and St. Therese just before her death—a beautiful view of St. Therese different from what you get in her autobiography, a quick & easy read); 4) *The Story of a Family*, by Fr. Stephane-Joseph Piat, OFM (I decided I wanted to get to know St. Therese better, and her family seemed a great place to start. All about the daily joys and sorrows of the ordinary family life of a great saint & several blessed, this book is great for *anyone*, but especially for you married or soon-to-be-married folk). So, Merry Christmas and happy reading!

Finally, for those of you who are vicariously experiencing postulancy with the Sisters of Life through me, I wanted to give you some recent highlights. We have been baking up quite a storm. The postulants were responsible for providing *all* of the pies for Sisters of Life Thanksgiving. I was delighted to share my skills in finishing of the crust of a pie with the finger-printed scalloped edge, taught to me by my mother (which I am sure was taught to her by Grandma). I've apparently gained a reputation for being *domestic*—I can hem a skirt, work a sewing machine, make a pie crust, and cook decently, all thanks to Mom (and Brenda & Christi, too ☺). With 25 pies in hand and all of our props for the traditional Postulants' Thanksgiving Day Skit, we arrived at Villa Maria, where all 70 sisters were meeting for Thanksgiving festivities. The pies were delicious and the above-mentioned skit was also an acclaimed success—we made shows for "SV-TV" (SV is the abbreviation for Sisters of Life, *Sorores Vitae*), featuring "The Barnabas Bunch" (a song to the tune of the Brady Bunch about how the postulants met the sisters and came together to live at St. Barnabas), The Hebdominator (a work-out program for religious sisters & brothers, named after the hebdomidarian, the person who leads the Liturgy of the Hours prayers), Please Understand Me (a show in which analyzed what different ways of folding your cloth napkin & placing it in the napkin ring revealed about your personality), and "Real Convent Heroes" (a spoof on Budweiser's "Real Men of Genius," highlighting some of the quirky jobs done around the convent, like ringing the bell which serves as the communal alarm clock or scraping out the peanut butter jar to recycle it, to thank all of the sisters for their generosity and *patience* with us). It was a riot.

More baking ensued with our preparations for the Advent Afternoon, a Mass and reception which the Sisters of Life host every year to thank all those who make it possible for the Sisters to live the life that we do and to do the work that we do (through donations and volunteering)." Our house baked over 500 chocolate chip cookies, which we added to the sum total of over 4000 cookies baked by all of the sisters (and some very generous friends). And it was a good thing we made so many, because approximately 800 people attended the Advent Afternoon. Besides a beautiful Mass with incredible choral music, it was very inspiring to see the generosity and providence of God in all of the people who are friends and helpers of the community.

And even more cooking followed in the past few days, as we prepared for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the celebration of Sr. Maris Stella's feast day yesterday. The postulants made Thai food with great success. Sr. Mary Elizabeth said it was "the best dinner she's ever had in the Convent," which gives us pretty high marks as she's

been here for 15 years. So, we did pretty well, considering that none of us have even cooked Thai food before. It probably wasn't very authentic, but it tasted good and none of us could tell the difference anyway. Another of our Feast Day practices is to decorate the dining room, and some ingenious postulants made our dining room into a star-lit dinner boat cruise. It was pretty impressive, but I'll have to leave it to your imaginations.

In other Sisters of Life news: The sisters hosted a Come & See retreat in November. It was quite a treat to see several familiar faces among the 21 young women who attended. And some fun things you wouldn't expect to see sisters doing: We went bowling on Long Island before going to a talk by Jason Evert (as you can imagine, bowling was a ton of fun, and the talk, directed to parents of teens on the subject of chastity, was *excellent*—go hear Jason if you ever get a chance); a quick stop by Jones Beach (on the same trip to Long Island—the beach is pretty cold in December, but the sunset over the water was absolutely beautiful and we collected some great shells to use as candle holders for the above-described “dinner cruise”); the neighborhood tree-lighting (we passed out hot chocolate and Santa Claus made an appearance on the local fire engine); jumping in *enormous* piles of leaves and playing “Nun Hunt” (our version of Man Hunt—outside hide & seek at night) at our retreat house in CT.

So, even though Advent is a season of silent growth, we've managed to keep ourselves pretty busy, as you can see. But, in all seriousness, I wish you a very blessed Advent and a very Merry coming of the Christ Child this Christmas. You are all in my prayers. Please keep me, my 8 fellow postulants (and our families—for most of us, this is our first Christmas away from home), and the remaining 61 Sisters of Life in your prayers, especially as we postulants prepare for our first family visit on Dec. 26<sup>th</sup>!

With Advent joy and much love,

*Manana*

p.s. I pray you have a blessed Advent & very Merry Christmas. ~~##~~  
I will be home Dec. 26-30 for a “family visit,” so I hope to see you then! Please feel free to share this letter w/ anyone who might be interested.

-M.