



# Friends & Disciples

Christmas 2025

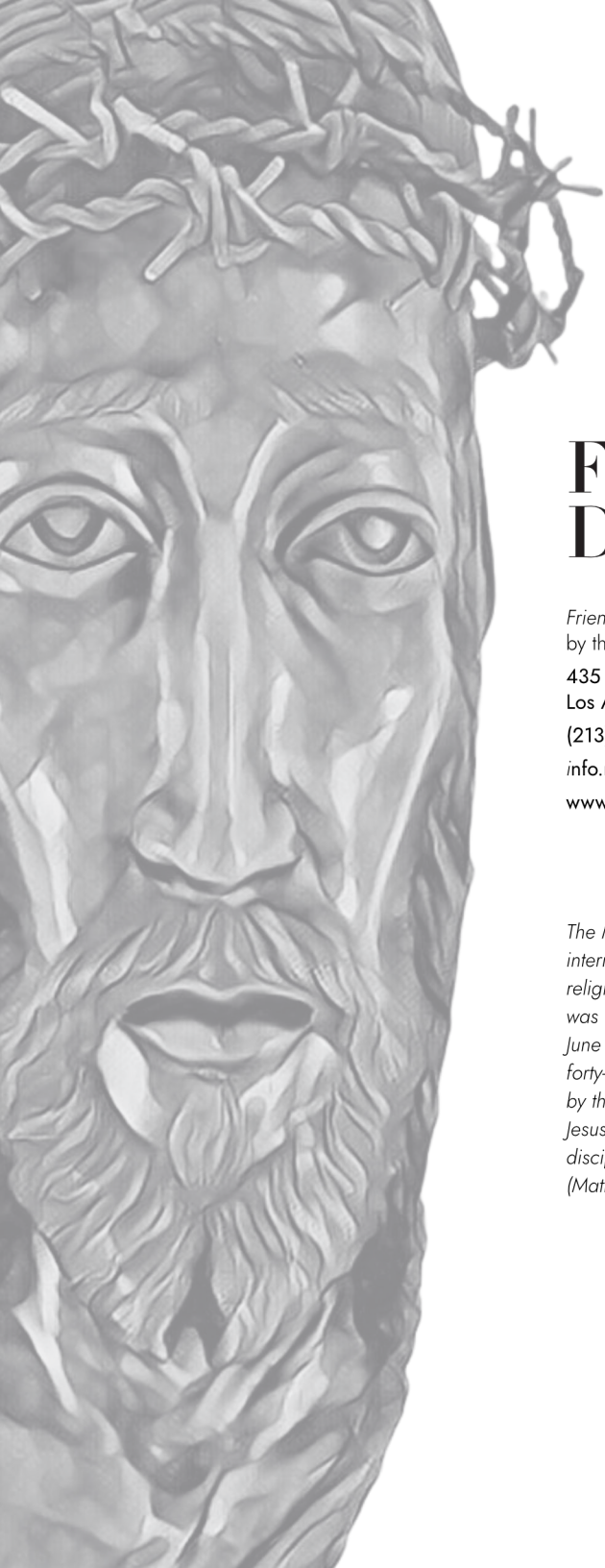
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MISSIONARIES OF JESUS AMERICAS



## WATER FOR CHRISTMAS

*This Christmas, this little girl will no longer have to walk for miles down the hill with her mother to fetch water for the family. This community faucet is just a few steps away from their home. Taken for granted in the lowlands, it is making a world of difference for the Tagakolu community that helped build it.*



# Friends & Disciples

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435 S Occidental Blvd.,  
Los Angeles, CA 90057

(213) 389 8439

[info.missionariesofjesus@gmail.com](mailto:info.missionariesofjesus@gmail.com)

[www.missionariesofjesus.com](http://www.missionariesofjesus.com)

*The Missionaries of Jesus is an international and multicultural religious missionary community. It was founded in the Philippines on June 12, 2002 by a group of forty-one men called and inspired by the mission and humanity of Jesus, who calls us to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).*



## *from the editor*

**J**oy is what Christmas brings. When the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, there was great rejoicing.

The birth of Jesus is a constant reminder that God is with us, not as a distant memory, but as a real presence in and throughout history. He is present in the Holy Eucharist, He is present in the Church, the Body of Christ, and He is present in the poor and the oppressed. Christmas reminds us that despite our unworthiness, Jesus will keep assuring us, "I am with you always, until the end of the age." This is indeed a great source of joy!

As missionaries, this is what we strive to do: to bring Jesus to people and be a reminder of His constant presence among us. In this issue, **Marites Gonzalo** shares her story of how a community of indigenous peoples in the Philippines felt God's presence in the building of a water system that alleviated the suffering of the people, especially the women and children. Gonzalo is the School Director of the Malita Tagakaulo Mission (MATAMIS) Indigenous Peoples Education Ministry, which the Missionaries of Jesus assist. **Melanio Viuya** next tells us how Christmas is celebrated in Vietnam. The Missionaries of Jesus (MJ) community, together with neighbors and other missionaries, made the spirit of Christmas felt especially among the children of their neighborhood. **Joseph Guerrero**, for his part, shares his encounter with migrants at migrant centers in Mexico. Through his stories, he shows us the human faces of these families who want nothing but what is best for their loved ones—a reality not often seen in the news.

For this past year, and the years before that as well, we have been able to bring Jesus to the people we minister because of you. You are missionaries in your own right because of your generosity and love. Thank you so much, and be assured of the prayers of the Missionaries of Jesus for you and for those you love. A Blessed Christmas to you!

*Joey Ganio Evangelista, MJ*

# JOIN THE MISSIONARIES OF JESUS

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to the light of Jesus,  
and let's never be  
diverted from His light!

*Pope Francis, February 25, 2024*



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# GOD HAS COME TO OUR VILLAGE

*Marites Gonzalo*

In October 2025, I had intimate conversations with mothers and residents in the mountain village of Tabunan in Malita, Davao Occidental, in the southern Philippines. The community I spoke with—the Tagakolu, one of the Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines—had recently received a functional water system, a monumental change that redefined their lives.

One of the most moving statements I heard came from Dumayeman Bell, a seventy-six-year-old widow and mother of seven. When I asked her about her life now, she became emotional, sharing a sentiment that captured the entire village’s gratitude: *“Dyumateng ya Tyumanem i banwa nami magi sa patubig ini,”* which literally translates to, “God has come to our village through this water system.”



*The men of the community install the solar panels that will provide power to the water pump while simultaneously constructing the water tank.*

Tabunan is located approximately 39 kilometers (24 miles) from the town of Malita. The water system, which prompted this profound statement, was provided through a partnership between the Assisi Development Foundation, Inc. (ADFI) and the Malita Tagakaulo Mission (MATAMIS)—where the Missionaries of Jesus (MJ) have served for nearly two decades—in collaboration with the local government unit of Datu Danwata.

For decades, the Tagakolu community members faced exhausting daily struggles simply to secure water. Every day, villagers—primarily women and children—would walk twenty minutes to one hour, down and then back up the mountain, carrying pails, gallons, and large containers.

Beyond the distance and the physical toll of carrying heavy loads, the limited water supply at the source was a major difficulty. People had to wait in line for their turn, and the scarcity meant that rainwater often had to suffice for essential tasks like bathing and dishwashing. As a result, many children frequently went to school without having taken a bath. Dumayeman recalled that in 1995, many people in the



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*The Missionaries of Jesus help feed urban poor children and assist their families in sending them to school.*

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The community works together to install plastic water pipes several miles long to connect the solar-powered pump to the water source.



village died of cholera due to unclean drinking water. She added that proper sanitation was nearly non-existent, with few households having proper toilets.

She vividly recounted the exhausting routine of her younger years: carrying heavy gallons of water in both hands, a baby in a sling, and a basin of laundry balanced on her head. Her younger sister, Marina (in her mid-40s), shared that people were so desperate for water they sometimes paid Php20.00–Php30.00 (\$0.25–\$0.51) for just five liters (1.32 gallons). Some resourceful residents used their motorcycles to haul water up the steep terrain.

The residents' dream of accessing safe water for sanitation and family well-being was finally set in motion when the partnership between MATAMIS and ADFI began in 2021. Tabunan was included as a partner for the Land and Livelihoods Project for indigenous farmers. During the first year of implementation in 2022, the water system was the village's top identified need. However, their initial hope was crushed when the project engineer informed them the identified water source was insufficient for a gravity-fed system. For three years, the dream stalled.



*People no longer have to climb several miles down the hill to fetch water.*

In January 2025, the engineer returned with an exciting new proposal: a Solar Powered Water System. Community leader and Barangay Councilor Moreno Montic, now president of the Tabunan Solar Powered Water System Association, who had played a significant role in planning and lobbying, was overjoyed. As he and Marina



*Members of the community joyfully gather around one of the faucets, patiently waiting for their turn to fetch water.*

shared, *"Migleya ya kadég nami pagliku na engineer aw awun da bagu paagi na makadateng ya tubig adi kanami,"* meaning, "We were glad when the engineer returned and told us that there was a new way for water to reach us."

The actual construction, involving the building of the tank, installing pipelines, setting up solar panels, and clearing the site, ran from May 30 to June 11, 2025. Community members of all ages worked collaboratively, led by four ADFI personnel. The local government unit assisted in hauling materials from the barangay site to the village. Motorcycles fitted with custom-built carriages, locally known as paku-paku, traversed eight kilometers of rocky, muddy, and slippery roads, undeterred by the rain or the scorching sun.

The relief was palpable. Aligado Laginan, a father of three and the system's newly trained plumber, explained his change in life: "Before, I would walk for thirty minutes going down and another thirty minutes going up after a whole day of farm work, just carrying buckets of water. I was still at the spring at nine o'clock in the evening

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*Two young women pose for a picture at one of the twelve community faucets.*

sometimes. It was too much of a burden.” Now, he says, “Life feels better and lighter. I feel like a rich man. I can provide or serve water to anyone who passes by or visits my house.”

Today, clean and reliable water flows from twelve communal faucets serving one hundred households in Tabunan. Mothers can dedicate more time to their families, children can access water without exhaustion, and the entire community enjoys better health. While challenges occur during the rainy season when sunlight is scarce for the solar pumps, the villagers proactively maintain containers to gather enough water.

For the villagers, water is more than a necessity; it is a symbol of forward momentum. They locally expressed this transformation by saying, “*Kyamatawan kami na pag-iman*

*aw tengtung na awun ugsud na kanami banwa*" (Hope has been rekindled, and our community has truly moved forward).

To ensure sustainability, the existing Tabunan Tribal Farmers Association created a policy that includes a maintenance committee and a monthly contribution of Php30.00 (\$0.51). They also have extensive future plans, including planting more endemic trees around the water sources, fencing the solar panels and reservoir, and adding necessary roofing.

The community expresses deep gratitude to the Assisi Development Foundation, Inc., the Malita Tagakaulo Mission, the local government unit, and every community member who worked tirelessly to make their dream a reality. These words perfectly capture the collective sentiment: "We didn't just receive water, we were given hope and courage that when we work together, we can achieve so much more." The working together, coupled with the flowing water, truly signifies *Tyumanem's* (God's) presence and grace among His beloved Tagakolu people. ■

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*Tagakolu children and their teacher in the southern Philippines who the Missionaries of Jesus assist in administering their school that truly respects their culture.*

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# CHRISTMAS IN VIETNAM

*Rev. Melanio Viuya, MJ*

The daily life in the Missionaries of Jesus seminary here in Ho Chi Minh City (HCM) begins very early. We wake up at 4:30 AM to prepare for the daily morning prayer, followed by the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. This is true not only in the seminary but throughout the city and the entire country. I tell friends jokingly that here, we have *Simbang Gabi* (Dawn Masses) every day of the whole year – unlike in the Philippines where it is limited to nine days in December. The truth is that Christmas celebrations here in Vietnam occur after and before two major Vietnamese festivals connected to the lunar year.

Before the Christmas season, we celebrate the *Trung thu* or mid-autumn festival, which happens on the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar year – which is on October 6th this year. Ushering in this festival are the ubiquitous colorful



*The community of the Missionaries of Jesus in Ho Chi Minh City.*



*One of the Catholic churches features an elaborate Bethlehem scene recreated in front of it.*

mooncake stores that dot Metro HCM. The festival is connected to the harvest season when the moon is the brightest and the roundest. On the night of the festival, children are seen traversing the streets of the neighborhood, carrying lanterns and watching a lion dance. Games are organized; sweets and mooncakes are distributed and shared. The festival becomes an occasion for family reunions, and mooncakes become symbols of life, hope, and a bright future.

After the Christmas season, the much-anticipated and celebrated *Tết* or lunar new year takes place. It typically falls between late January and mid-February. The coming one will be on February 17, 2026. Like the mid-autumn festival—but much more so—the streets are decorated with bright, beautiful, and colorful lights, flowers, and stores selling *banh pia*. The celebration lasts for 15 to 16 days. People go back to their provinces to be with families and ancestors—living and dead. Consequently, many businesses close during this period. Many weeks in advance, people begin preparing: families clean their homes, decorate with peach blossoms in the north and yellow apricot flowers in the south, and prepare traditional foods like *bánh chung* or *bánh tét* (sticky rice cakes) and pickled onions. They also devote time to cleaning the cemeteries in honor of their ancestors. There are vibrant



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*Bros. Jason Varona and  
Aaron Raphael Paudel*

street celebrations, fireworks, and lion dances similar to those seen during the mid-autumn festival. It is also a time for family reunions and giving “*li xì*” (red envelopes with money) to children and elders for good luck. The festival is characterized by a joyful atmosphere, expressions of gratitude, renewal, and hope for prosperity in the coming year.

Having said this, one understands why Christmas, or *Giáng sinh*, although celebrated here in Vietnam, is not as elaborate as elsewhere—say, in the Philippines. It is not a traditional holiday here, although it has been growing in significance in many city centers like HCM, perhaps for commercial purposes. It is marked by a blend of Christian customs, local adaptations, and a festive spirit that brings together people of all backgrounds. The holiday is viewed as a joyful occasion, embraced not only by Christians but also by many non-religious Vietnamese who see it as an opportunity for social gatherings, entertainment, family outings, and to boost sales and spending.

Like in any other city in the world where it is celebrated, streets, shopping malls, and hotels are often adorned with Christmas lights, Santa Claus figures, nativity scenes,



## HELP US BUILD A CAPITAL FUND

As a very young congregation, the community of the Missionaries of Jesus is building a CAPITAL FUND (\$1,500,000.00) to help finance MJ seminaries, missionary sustenance, homes for retired and sick missionaries, and programs for evangelization and efforts to uplift the poor through education, health and other services. HELP US BY MAKING A DONATION!

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*Fr. Melanio with the MJ community visiting a family during Christmas.*

and artificial Christmas trees. Local shops sell festive accessories, and many homes hang simple Christmas decorations.

Christian families attend midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Churches across the country, particularly in areas with larger Christian populations, host elaborate services and nativity plays. I have already celebrated two Christmases here but have not experienced any traditional Vietnamese Christmas meal yet. There is no *noche*




*The MJ community, in collaboration with neighbors and other missionaries, organized a Christmas party for the children in the neighborhood.*

*buena* on Christmas Eve after the midnight Mass. Nor is there a *media noche* on the eve of January 1.

Last year, some community members enjoyed the city's Christmas decorations by taking a night bus ride. From early December, central districts like District 1 and District 5 are illuminated with extravagant light displays. Popular streets such as Nguyen Hue and Le Duan are transformed into pedestrian zones filled with glittering decorations. Major hotels and shopping centers compete to impress onlookers, guests, and clients with Christmas displays.

Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of HCM attracts many visitors for its beautiful nativity scenes and midnight Mass. The whole cathedral is covered with thousands of bright lights. The area around it bustles with people and vendors selling snacks. The city's large Catholic community, along with an enthusiastic general population and tourists, makes the holiday especially lively. Catholic families set up nativity scenes at home



*The Missionaries of Jesus provide free medical and dental services to the poor each year in the places where they work in the Philippines and Guatemala.*

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*During the party, some adults dressed as Santa Claus and organized games for the children.*

or outside their residences, and neighbors come together to admire each other's displays.

While familiar traditional symbols such as Santa Claus, reindeer, and Christmas trees are abundant, local variations add a unique local touch. Tropical flowers are used in decorations, and one sees Christmas displays alongside traditional Vietnamese lanterns. In some neighborhoods, elaborate (small-scale and oversized) nativity scenes are creatively constructed with local materials. The ordinary façade of some



*This photo shows Fr. Melanio and a friend at a mall in Vietnam. Behind them is a Christmas display with a snowman.*

churches gives way to the giant displays of the manger scenes. I had the opportunity to drive around and enjoy the decorations in one of the neighborhoods.

Christmas is also a time for giving. Many churches and community groups organize charity drives, delivering food, clothing, and gifts to children, the elderly, and disadvantaged families. This spirit of generosity resonates with the Buddhist value of compassion prominent in Vietnamese culture. Last year, the community of the Missionaries of Jesus participated in such an organized activity in collaboration with our neighbors and other religious missionaries. Some adults and children were



*This Catholic church in Ho Chi Minh City, which is frequented at Christmas time, is adorned with a Christmas star.*

dressed as Santas. After some prayers and Christmas songs, the children were fed, followed by games and gift-giving. It was a joyful night for the migrants from the provinces.

Although *Giáng sinh* or Christmas is not a major celebration in Vietnam, it follows the rituals and reasons, the visuals and visions of the celebrations before and after it: *Trung thu* (Mid-autumn Festival) and *Tết* (Lunar New Year). In every festival, family members and friends gather, celebrating and giving thanks for all the material and spiritual gifts received, expressing hope for better and brighter days, and sharing their fortune with others.

For Christians here, as in other places, Christmas is about more than just colorful lights, lanterns, flowers, streamers, and ornaments. It celebrates the birth of the Light of the World—the Son of God—who became human so that we might share in his divinity. The vibrant adornments are not only festive but also reflective of the joy and hope the birth of Christ brings. Through these outward displays, the faithful express their inner gratitude and celebrate the spiritual renewal that Christmas sights and sounds represent and convey. ■



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like a little child will never enter it.



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# CHRIST WILL BE BORN AMONG THE MIGRANTS

*Rev. Joseph Guerrero, MJ*

**T**he freezing days of December in Mexico City pierced the lonely hearts of Daniel and Deanna. The married couple had left Venezuela in October 2024 with the dream of starting a new life in the United States through the amnesty program. On Christmas day, a warm blanket of celebration with other migrants relieved them from the unforgiving, biting solitude.

Mostly Venezuelan friends invited them to welcome the newborn Jesus on Christmas Day. The celebration of the Nativity has always been an integral part of the lives of these Venezuelans, from their native land to their journey as itinerants in places far away from home.



*Families at a migrant center in Matamoros, Mexico, celebrating Christmas together.*



Deanna fondly remembers the *pan de jamón* (ham bread) that her friends prepared for this celebration. The bread made her recall her family, her friends, and the Venezuelan people. Her eyes glistened as she told me about the *pan de jamón*.

Sharing stories reunited the Venezuelan migrants in their celebration. They recounted how they endured the treacherous sixty six-mile Darién Gap before reaching Panama from Colombia. They felt content that they had helped each other and other migrants of various nationalities. They shared sad stories of abandonment, discrimination, threats, and physical assault. They felt deep joy and solidarity among themselves and from the people who had assisted them. They were never alone in their wandering, believing that God had always been there accompanying them.

On April 6, Deanna gave birth to Liam. He is a healthy child. As a family, they will celebrate Christmas this year at the Migrant House in Matamoros. Celebration has always been part of migrants' lives. They refuse to give in to the engulfing sadness of uncertainty, despair, and rejection.

Yuri, a small restaurant owner in Guerrero, Mexico, was kidnapped and tortured for three days by organized criminals for refusing to pay extortion dues. She had to



*Brittany celebrates her First Holy Communion at a migrant center in Mexico.*

escape for her life, together with her husband and three daughters. At the migrant house in Matamoros, she spent months recovering from her traumatic experience through mental health therapy. After she recovered, she asked me to celebrate the First Holy Communion of her three daughters. They were supposed to have the sacrament at their parish in Guerrero.

While I was giving catechetical instruction to Yuri's daughters, she began looking for godparents and went shopping for white, pretty gowns for them. Her face radiated during the whole preparation, but most especially on the day when we celebrated the First Holy Communion of her dear daughters. A grilled chicken ordered online brought our cheerful hearts together as we celebrated this wonderful event. Physical and emotional suffering have not dominated Yuri's life. A healing process and the celebration of life, coupled with Christ's persistent presence in their family, renewed and transformed her into a strong and enduring woman.

Celebration of life fosters resilience in migrants going through all kinds of afflictions. They order online pizza, grilled chicken, burgers, tacos, and the like to celebrate as a family or with friends for birthdays, baptisms, First Holy Communions,





For the International Day of Migrants and Refugees, the migrant center set up an inflatable castle for the children.

accomplishments, and so on. They eat outside their tents or at the migrant house cafeteria, sharing stories, laughing, cracking jokes, or simply eating quietly.

Edgar, Violet, and their three children left their home in Oaxaca, Mexico. Gangs were after them for a supposed obligation they were to answer to. It was his son Dylan's seventh birthday when they reached Mexico City. The family always celebrated their birthdays. Dylan wanted to have his fiesta with the usual piñatas, cakes, gifts, and so on. Edgar, feeling sorry, told Dylan that for now, they could not have it that way. Instead, he brought his family to a McDonald's restaurant to celebrate his son's birthday with his favorite burger. He promised Dylan that, one day, after they arrive at their destination, he will have his usual birthday celebration.

On October 5, we celebrated the World Day of Migrants and Refugees with a wonderful event. A celebration of the Holy Eucharist at the Matamoros Cathedral gathered migrants staying in migrant houses as well as those renting houses. They were especially honored as "witnesses of hope" (Pope Francis) in the celebration.

Lunch was served at the Casa del Migrante San Juan Diego y Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. The migrants said hello to one another after months apart. Activities for

the children included the installation of a portable swimming pool, an inflatable bouncing castle, and lots of parlor games. Water splashed out of the swimming pool as kids dove in. A one-year-old was seen being tossed up and down in the bouncing castle. Excited children filled the atmosphere with screams as they competed while playing together. Gifts were given to the children. The celebration filled the migrants' hearts with joy and, to a certain extent, soothed their anxiety and concerns. They left late that day, hoping that such a celebration would be held again soon. Some left quietly, affected by sentimental farewells.

All Saints' Day once again gathered the migrants to celebrate. Some women and children have been heartily preparing the traditional Mexican altar of the dead. At the altar, we placed cakes, candies, and soft drinks. We were all excited to celebrate a little fiesta with the saints and our dead relatives. At the start of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, we announced aloud the names of our dearly beloved departed. Then, each solemnly placed their written names at the altar of the dead and lit a small candle.

We look forward to celebrating more fiestas, especially in December, when we will come together and pray the Holy Rosary on the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe,




*Youth from surrounding parishes entertain the children of Alfredo Púmarejé migrant camp.*



who has always protected the migrants. Mary and Joseph will touch them during the posadas, when we remember, through ritual drama, hymns, and prayers, that this couple were not welcomed as strangers on a cold night in Bethlehem. It is Jesus who lives in the hearts of simple people who will share with them shelter, food, clothing, and above all, human warmth. Posadas and Christmas will be celebrated with cheerful songs, prayers, gifts from donors, piñatas, candies, and toys for children.

Migrants are resilient people. This can be seen in their many ways of celebrating life and their faith in God. He accompanies them in their struggles and sorrows, but most especially through joyful celebrations. These celebrations bring forth what is best and most beautiful in them as human persons, and also in those who welcome and accompany them on their journey. Christ will be born in their midst, and God will come to celebrate this divine event with them. Come, let us not be afraid and witness this joyful news! ■



*Everyone wants  
to leave a good  
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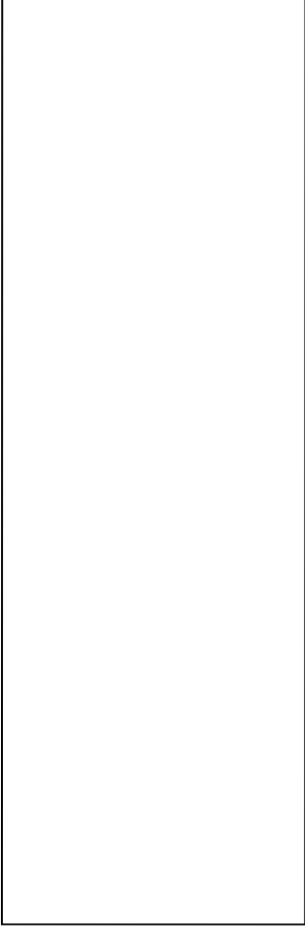


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