

## **Encountering Christ at Christmas**

**By Jem Sullivan, Ph.D.**

God desires to encounter us in friendship and love. The whole of salvation history, beginning with Genesis, is a record of God's yearning to encounter the creatures he created out of love and for love. As Saint John tells us God so loved the world that He sent into this world his only Son, the Word made flesh, to dwell among us and within us. As Advent hope turns to Christmas joy, the Church invites us to the great feast of God's love revealed in the poor, humble Infant Jesus, the Word made flesh born of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

At Christmas we encounter God's enduring and abundant love as sheer gift. We do not earn or merit divine love. We encounter the unconditional love of God as grace, as gift!

The encounter with God's love in the Child Jesus transforms us to see Christ in all those around us. In the midst of gift giving and gift receiving, the greatest gift we receive at Christmas is recognizing God's love in the Word made flesh *and* in our brothers and sisters. As we wish family, friends and neighbors the joy and peace of Christmas we experience the harmony that Jesus brings to a deeply divided, fragmented world.

The gift of Christmas faith comes alive in diverse and culturally rich devotions and customs in our Asian and Pacific Island communities. Our Catholic identity is rooted in our common faith in Jesus Christ. At Christmas we are grateful for our spiritual leaders – Bishops, pastors, priests, religious, and laity - who shepherd our communities with care and dedicated service. We are thankful for the gift of family through which faith is handed from generation to generation. Most of all, we give thanks for the gift of faith in Jesus Christ that renews our commitment to build a culture of encounter and dialogue among all people.

Throughout the Christmas season the Word of God invites us to calm our fears, quiet our hearts, and loosen our grip on the superficial demands of the season. In the weeks leading up to Christmas the days fill up quickly with tasks to complete, gatherings to attend, and preparations to make. God's word calls us to see in our many good efforts the radical wonder of what God has done and is doing in our families and communities. In Asian and Pacific Island communities celebrations of Christmas express the joy of encountering Christ who is Emmanuel, God with us. In the words of Pope Francis, "The face of God has been revealed in a human face. It did not appear in an angel, but in one man, born in a specific time and place. By his incarnation, the Son of God tells us that salvation comes through love, acceptance, respect for this poor humanity of ours, which we all share in a great variety of races, languages, and cultures. Yet all of us are brothers and sisters in humanity!" (Christmas message, 2018).

The joy of Christmas faith unites Asian and Pacific Islander Catholics to welcome the newborn Jesus as we sing with one voice in our diverse languages – "O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!"