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Sister Maria Cigolini, MSCS, 86, center

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From left:
 Brother Jordan Coonen, OP, 84;
 Sister Maria Cigolini, MSCS, 86;
 Sister Sharon Glumb, SLW, 76.
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Every year, for four weeks, the Church remembers what it means to wait for the Savior, during the Northern Hemisphere's darkest season, when leaves have fallen and northerly winds blow. Each of us must look at how we can learn to cry "*Maranatha! Come, Lord!*"

In most places, creation grows quieter in December. People retreat indoors, and animals settle in for their long winter's sleep. Humanity, being humanity, fills the quiet with busyness. December has most of us racing to buy gifts, decorate trees, and meet deadlines for work and school. Into that busyness, the Church speaks. She invites us to slow down, turn our eyes away from to-do lists, and towards the people who waited in darkness for the coming of Christ.

Many long centuries separate us from the people of Israel. During Advent, we should remember how like them we are. Like them, we live in darkness without Jesus. Like them, we are called to repent — to turn from sin and towards God. We remember that even now, in the age of the Church, we still wait for Jesus. We wait for the One who will wipe away our tears and make all things new. Lastly, we remember that, like them, we cannot know true joy until we know Christ. He is the source of joy. Every experience of joy flows from him and points back to him. Brightly lit trees and brightly wrapped packages are all well and good, but it's Jesus, the babe born in Bethlehem, who makes Christmas truly joyful.

The themes the Church recalls in her Sunday Gospel readings during Advent are darkness, repentance, waiting, joy. Those are also the themes that run through every life. Each of us struggles through times of darkness. Each of us is called to spend our days turning to God again and again. Each of us, as we grow in love for Jesus, waits for him with greater and greater expectation. Each of us only finds true joy when we find him.

Life really is one long Advent. It is an anxious expectation for the God who loves us, who heals what is broken, and who will usher us into a life of love, untouched by loss. We see this clearly in the lives of the saints and especially in the life of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Constant loss and constant grief kept her ever aware of the world's darkness. She understood that the Christian life is always a life of repentance. She lived in anticipation of encountering the Jesus she loved. When she did — in His Word, His Church, and the Eucharist — joy followed.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. How does the culture make it difficult for us to enter into the spirit of Advent?
2. Do you have a favorite Advent tradition?
3. What is one thing you can do this Advent, to prepare your heart for Jesus' coming?
4. What has been the darkest time in your life?
5. Did you have hope in the midst of that darkness?
6. How has having hope in times of darkness changed your experience of the darkness?