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Purple is more than just a color on the Advent wreath

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Young Voices

I wish I had thrown a party for the beginning of the liturgical year.

Instead, I went to Mass and got an ill-inspired tip-of-the-hat, practically un-reverential curtsy to this wonderful season and this wonderful time. The priest nestled his almost-sarcastic "Happy Advent" in between two more pressing "deeper thoughts." If I let him, he could have extinguished the very flame of hope I have in this very troubled world. If I let others "celebrate" Advent in a way that took away its big, dramatic, lively, expectant nature, I would be contributing to the extinction of a promise fulfilled.

I wanted a HAPPY ADVENT! that put a smile on my face, caused my heart to leap, and pushed my feet and hands to go somewhere and do something.

Then I thought, Does everyone else live on the edge of what is new? Or do people live in the "what is" and "what was"?

In contrast to the lackadaisical "Happy Advent" from the priest, I looked around. People all around me were sporting their favorite version of purple. It almost seemed like we were cheering the priest on with his purple vestment. Like a fan who is surrounded by other fans and a team we hope will do well, I grew in excitement for our potential and our teamwork. From deep purple sweaters and blouses to lavender- and fuschia-lined shirts and accessories, I noticed my neighbors dressing for the part. In a sea of hundreds, I saw sparkles of purple.

Perhaps the church really does understand this moment. Perhaps we are really celebrating a new, expectant time for God's promise to be real in our lives; after all, we have been through so much these last few months. Maybe it is time to birth a new expression of love, joy and hope.

So I sat there and prayed. Images of people all across the world played in my head like B-roll in a movie. I saw President Barack Obama, Gov. Mitt Romney, Herman Cain and his pizza; Sr. Simone Campbell, Sr. Helen Prejean and Sr. Mary Edwin, my sixth-grade teacher; I saw my students -- attentive, distant, listening, curious, and tuned-out; I saw committed students and staff that gathered for the Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice hosted by the Ignatian Solidarity Network; religious leaders living in community with the people they have been called to serve; I saw disenfranchised church people and minimally churched saints and sinners in our midst.

Then I kept hearing my friend's words in relation to the critical Catholic social teaching theme of life and dignity of the human person: How do we restore each person's life and dignity?

During this anticipatory time before Christmas, I realized that what I am waiting for is what other people may be waiting for, too. I am waiting for a the time when our world is no longer at war with itself, a time when the death penalty is abolished, and so is human trafficking. I am waiting for a world where politics of bishops and nuns can be overcome by service to the least of these and our money can be used to build relationships, not tear them down, as we witnessed throughout this election season.

Then I saw this map: Robert Vanderbei's purple America.

We are carefully led to believe in the dramatic extremes of consumerism (Black Thursday/Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday and even Giving Tuesday); church morality and politics (bishops' framework on education, the stance on marriage, health, and community, as evidenced by the fragile relationship with many religious women); national policy (the "fiscal cliff" and our growing national debt, immigration reform, the Hispanic vote). We are led to believe that we are either Red or Blue.

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But the truth is we all bleed Purple. Vanderbei's map shows that our political identity as a nation is not just Red and Blue, but shades of Red, Blue and, most of all, Purple.

So as I looked out at the sea of people with the sparkle of purple, I dreamt of a world where expectation and new life were the methods for which we established relationships with one another. I dreamt of a world where communities offered restoration to the lives of those unseen, unaccepted, unheard, and unnoticed. I dreamt of a world where reconciliation became a way of life, as breathing is in our best interest.

And then emerges the Rose, or the pink candle in our traditional understanding of the four- or five-candled Advent wreath. That our expectation and joy may be realized now is a tribute to God being found in all things *already* and *all ready*. All ready to meet us, support us and love us. All ready to introduce us to one another so we may continue to create good partnerships and options for one another and the rest of our communities. All ready to offer us forgiveness and mercy when we have not been truth to God's will and God's hope for us.

Although it made me sad to hear a less-than-excited "Happy Advent," the priest did focus my attention on what really does matter: God's initiative in my life. Now I just want to spend time preparing myself to recognize God's will, God's grace, God's response to restoring the dignity of each person, to choose to be a part of it all, to choose purple. Yes, I am all ready.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit www.contemplativesinaction.org for more information.]

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