As we come up on the winter solstice in a few weeks, we are now in the darkest part of the year, and certainly all around us there can seem to be quite a bit of darkness too; from the things we battle in life, to the things on TV. Sometimes all of us will certainly wonder “God, where are you?” in this, as we try to find God.

I’m not sure if that was on the minds of the Benedictine Nuns of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Warsaw in August of 1944, because for the past 5 years to that point, despite the seemingly hopeless situation all around them, they kept finding God in their midst, literally as death was at their door.

One day that August, Mother Janina Byszewska said tot he other nuns: “Apparently, it is God’s will that we die here. “ She was the superior of the community, which found itself in the midst of the fighting of the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944.

Shortly thereafter, 34 nuns, four priests and a thousand civilians died under the rubble of their own convent.

The wartime story of the heroic nuns from Warsaw begins during the uprising in August 1944, when their convent became a site of both faith and tragedy. On Aug. 1, 1944, the Polish underground Home Army launched the uprising against the German occupiers, who had controlled the country since 1939. The resistance hoped to liberate the city before the Soviet Red Army arrived.

Fierce street fighting soon surrounded the Benedictine convent. On Aug. 6, the feast of the Transfiguration, one of the commanders asked the sisters to open the convent for use as a military base. The date is considered the beginning of their martyrdom that the sisters were well aware of.

The Benedictine convent was founded by Queen Maria Sobieska as a votive offering of thanksgiving for the victory of her husband, King Jan III Sobieski, who in 1683 fought a decisive battle for Europe against the Turks at Vienna.

Queen Maria, who was French, invited the nuns from the congregation founded by Mother Mectilde of the Blessed Sacrament, born Catherine de Bar, based on the rule of St. Benedict but with an important innovation: The

nuns were to adore the Blessed Sacrament continuously, to make reparation for insults and blasphemies, and in addition to the traditional vows, they took a fourth vow of perpetual adoration as a sacrifice.

By 1939, the convent was home to a remarkable group of women. Mother Tomea Koperska, the novice master, held a doctorate in philosophy and was an expert in St. Thomas Aquinas. Sister Anzelma Matuszczak studied Polish literature, and Magdalena Schmitz de Grollenbourg, the “funniest sister in the convent,” was a music conservatory graduate. The community also included noblewomen such as Mother Byszewska and Mother Celestyna Wielowieyska, as well as the daughters of farmers, craftsmen, townspeople and even a sister born out of wedlock. There was also Sister Klara Zdrojewska, who struggled with reading and writing, who was a mystic whose counsel the superior always sought. Sister Ignacja Rejewska had converted from Calvinism, drawn to the sacrament of confession as a path to spiritual growth.

As the battle raged, the sisters gave away their food and medicine, cared for wounded insurgents in a makeshift hospital, and continued their ceaseless adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The Germans soon

recognized the convent as a resistance point and bombarded it with incendiary and demolition bombs.

The sisters, known in Warsaw as heroic “Sakramentki” had the opportunity to evacuate earlier, but the commanders of the uprising asked them to stay and not take away the soldiers’ hope.

Mother Byszewska agreed. “Apparently, it is God’s will that we persevere and die here, in this position.” It was their consent to death.

In fact, even before the worst days of the uprising — reminiscent of hell in memories of those who survived — arrived, the sisters had asked Mother Byszewska for permission to sacrifice their lives for Warsaw, for Poland and the world to belong to Christ.

It was not an easy request. Sister Katarzyna Kuzminska, to whom Christ appeared in a crown of stars and demanded this sacrifice from her, resisted terribly because she was afraid of death.

“Jesus demands a sacrifice from me, but I resist and am terribly afraid,” the sisters recalled her saying. She is remembered as one eager for mortification, a hardworking and humble nun.

After 26 days under siege, they sensed the end was near. On Aug. 31, 1944, the Germans launched a final attack. The nuns descended to the basement with the Blessed Sacrament; some donned their solemn habits to meet Christ, their bridegroom, while Sister Teresa Tomaszewska calmly kept knitting, saying her work might still help someone after her death.

That afternoon, the beautiful Church of St. Casimir and the convent were reduced to ruins. The library of the monastery, holding 60,000 volumes, was burned to the ground. A story circulated in Warsaw that as the sisters perished in adoration, white doves rose into the sky. Thirty-four nuns, four priests and a thousand civilians died; only 12 sisters survived.

After the Germans retreated, the survivors immediately returned and began the arduous work of rebuilding. Today, residents of Warsaw, long convinced of the sisters’ martyrdom, gather in the convent’s rebuilt

basement twice a year — on Aug. 31 and Nov. 1, the feast of All Saints — to pray for the beatification of the “Thirty-Four.”

What the sisters were very much aware of was that God was in their midst, even in the horrific situation of the darkness of World War II, and that they also were a sign for the world about love for others.

Advent is a season of joyful waiting where we prepare for two things. The first is for our own encounter with God, when we will stand before Him at the end of our lives or when He comes again. The second is for Christmas, when we reflect on the first coming of our Lord. Both of these things come down to answering the question “does God matter to me.” Most everyone would say He surely does, but as our lives get so filled with so many other things, it can be easy to lose sight of just how much we matter to God, and of how God needs to matter to us.

First, we need to ask ourselves what mountain are we climbing? Isaiah says “In days to come, the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills.” The key word there is “highest.” Ideally in Advent, we can find a moment to hit the

“pause” button and look at our lives and ask ourselves what we are going after. Is it a career? Certainly school and work are important, but if we are so focused on that to the point where we never have time to pray or time for family it’s a problem. Is it being appreciated by people? Sometimes we can have a need for praise, or a desire to keep an uneasy peace, so we never speak out for what is right and what matters most, which is God’s law. The Sisters had adoration all day, every day, and this allowed them to hear Jesus so clearly. Advent is a great time to consider more time for prayer; or coming back to Mass; or encountering God’s mercy in confession, as we’ll have our parish confession service this Monday evening. Look for ways to see and hear Jesus this season.

Second, we have to ask ourselves what is getting in the way of us climbing that mountain? Maybe its possessions; maybe it’s an attitude that needs to change of being expectant, or objectifying the body, or taking advantage of others, or anger in one’s heart. We are hopefully seeking God as life goes on - no longer the infant in the manger, but the God who wants to burst into our lives just as He came into this world all those years ago. Sometimes there’s stumbling blocks like sins of habit or things we minimize and say

hey no problem, no big deal, I've got this thing under control when little by little it's taking over.

Third, are we reaching out to God and to others to help us climb that mountain? The sisters each had different gifts, but supported one another, and then supported their countrymen in the face of incredible adversity. They were hope, and gave that to one another. Mountain climbers are often roped together when one falls, their fall can be stopped. So it is in life, but how often we want to be untethered from one another. When we are hurting, when we are falling on our climb up the mountain, may we not fear asking for help knowing we can turn to others to help us through those dark moments.

Lastly, we need to have God incorporate our entire life, not just part of our lives. Isaiah says "All nations shall stream toward" His mountain. The key word here is "all." If God is front and center for us, it spills over into other parts of our lives. When our minds and souls are filled with God, we make time for prayer throughout the week. We talk about the faith together as a family. We look for ways to become a better steward and give back the love God has given us through service to our parish or family. We look at Mass

not as fulfillment of an obligation but as an invitation to know God at a deeper level. We always need to be on guard to make sure that God is not someone we devote part-time to, but someone whom we invite into our hearts and who we get to know deeper with every passing day of our lives.

Our second reading puts it so beautifully: “You know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep.” We all need sleep, but spiritual sleep is not a good thing; it means we become indifferent to God. Saint Paul is talking to his community in Rome, urging them to prepare for their encounter with Christ, knowing just like the sisters in Warsaw did that threats and challenges were all around them. Now is the time to wake up. The battle is hard, the night is long, but Jesus is with us. May we use Advent do re-acquaint ourselves and one another with how to see our Lord, and throw off the works of darkness and giving glory to God, knowing together, we will climb the mountain to the heavenly kingdom.