Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



An audience member holds a figurine of baby Jesus as Pope Francis leads his Sunday Angelus prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Dec. 16. (CNS/EPA/Giuseppe Lami)

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With Christmas just over a week away, visitors came to St. Peter's Square with their Baby Jesus figurines for a traditional blessing by the pope.

Many children came with small figurines for their family Nativity scene, others held delicate sculptures, and one group set a giant statue of the Baby Jesus on top of stacks of hay bales. "All the joy in a crib," said the banner in front of the display.

Blessing the statues after reciting the Angelus prayer Dec. 16, Pope Francis told the little ones, "Dear children, may you feel wonder when you gather in your homes in prayer before the Nativity, gazing at Baby Jesus."

To see God is to feel amazement, "wonder at the great mystery of God made man. And the Holy Spirit will put humility, tenderness and the goodness of Jesus in your hearts," he said.

"Jesus is good, Jesus is tender, Jesus is humble. This is the real Christmas!" he said.

Before praying the Angelus on what is known as Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, the pope explained why the church is invited to rejoice.

Jesus, the Emmanuel, is "God with us," and his presence is the source of joy, Francis said. He came not to punish but to forgive and this leads people to feel joyful and full of praise.

God wants to redeem and save those whom he loves, the pope said, underlining that God's love is "incessant" and tender like a father's love for his child.

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Just as Mary was called to welcome and bring the Christ child into the world, people today are also called to welcome the Gospel and so that it can "become flesh" and

come into the world in people's actual lives.

People of faith should know they need not be anxious or feel despair, but need to "present to God our requests, our needs, our concerns with prayers and supplications."

"The awareness that when in difficulty we can always turn to the Lord, and that he never rejects our invocations, is a great reason for joy," he said.

There are no worries or fears that can ever "take away from us the serenity that comes from knowing that God always lovingly guides our lives," the pope said. "Even in the midst of problems and suffering, this certainty nourishes hope and courage."

After reciting the prayer, the pope also highlighted the adoption Dec. 10 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. He expressed his hope that the agreement would facilitate "responsibility, solidarity and compassion toward those who, for various reasons, have left their country."