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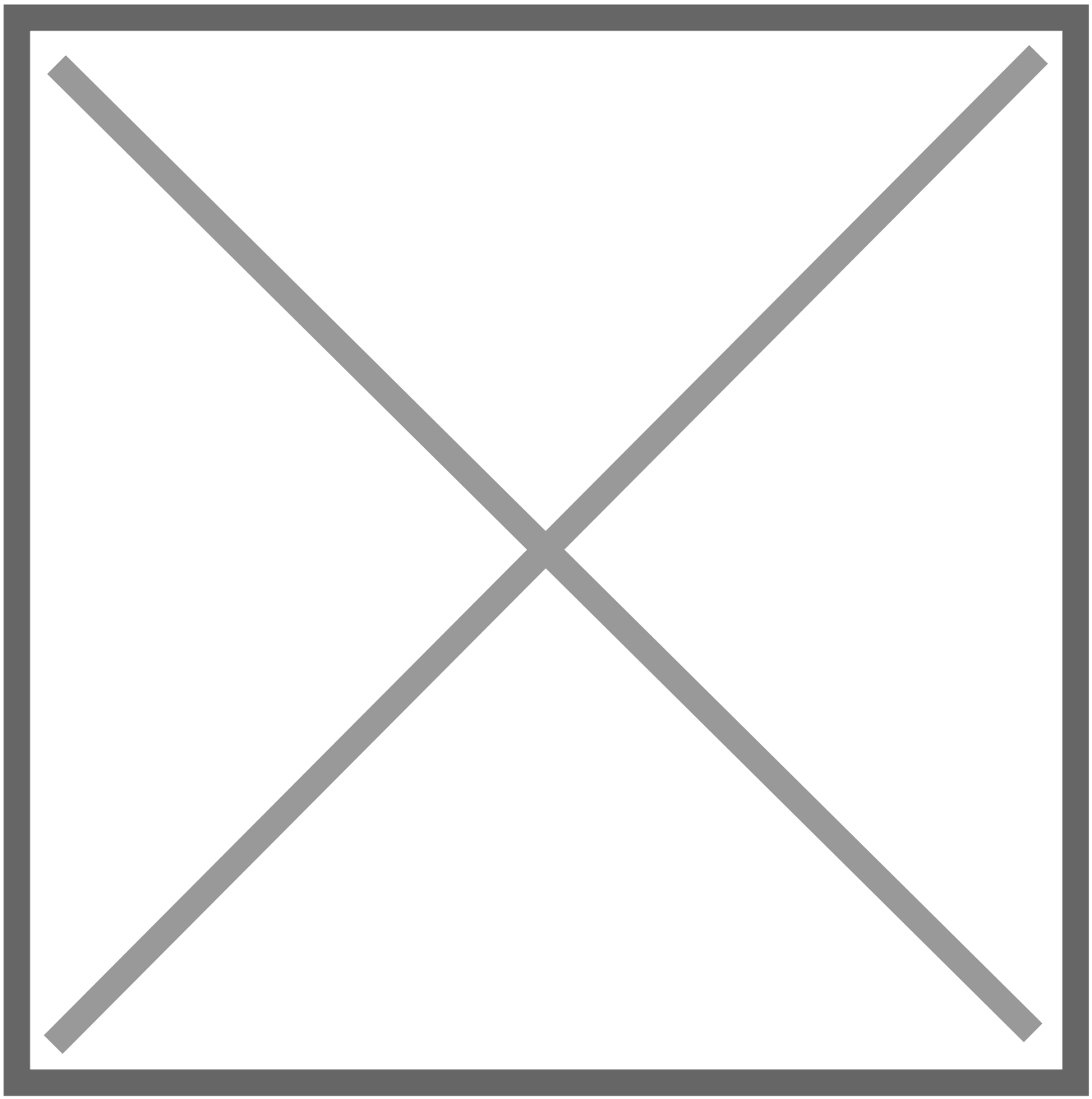

Pope Francis kisses a figurine of the baby Jesus as he celebrates Christmas Eve Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 24, 2020. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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ROME — Indifference towards those on the margins is an offense to God's love, warned Pope Francis during his Christmas Eve Mass, saying that Christ is found among the poor.

"On this night of love, may we have only one fear: that of offending God’s love, hurting him by despising the poor with our indifference," the pope said in his homily on Dec. 24.

An estimated 2,000 individuals were present, including members of the Vatican hierarchy and high-ranking diplomats from around the globe, in St. Peter's Basilica as Francis celebrated the first of his 2021 Christmas liturgies.

Yet Francis said that in order to experience the "scandalous truth" of Christmas, it is necessary to look away from the center of the church and instead to be "close to the forgotten ones of the peripheries."

"It is in them that he wants to be honored," the pope said.

Jesus, he continued, "comes where human dignity is put to the test. He comes to ennoble the excluded and he first reveals himself to them: not to educated and important people, but to poor working people."

Francis pointed to the example of the shepherds, describing them as simple and poor workers to whom Christ decided to first reveal himself.

The pope went on to use his homily to underscore the importance of dignified work, saying "God tonight comes to fill with dignity the austerity of labor."

"On the day of life, let us repeat: no more deaths in the workplace!" Francis pleaded. "And let us commit ourselves to ensuring this."

The dignity of work was also a central theme in the pope's 2022 World Day of Peace message released on Dec. 21 in anticipation of the new year, which recalled the exacerbated economic inequalities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the workplace.

Despite the sober tone of the pope's message, the atmosphere in St. Peter's was festive, with bright red poinsettias surrounding the main altar and the sounds of a full choir filling the basilica for the 7:30 p.m. "midnight Mass."

The sizable congregation — which included some 28 cardinals, 18 bishops and 160 priests — offered a stark contrast to last year's pared back Christmas Eve liturgy, which was closed to the general public and where only 200 people were allowed to be present due to pandemic restrictions.

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While the setting was ornate, Francis sought to shift attention away from the surrounding splendor.

"God does not rise up in grandeur, but lowers himself into littleness," he said, reflecting on the Christ child. "The one who embraces the universe needs to be held in another’s arms. The one who created the sun needs to be warmed. Tenderness incarnate needs to be coddled."

While most people "spend a lifetime pursuing success," Francis said, "Jesus is born in order to serve."

Not only did Christ come into the world as a little child, the pope said, but "God desires to come into the little things of our life."

"He wants to inhabit our daily lives, the things we do each day at home, in our families, at school and in the workplace," said the pope. "Amid our ordinary lived experience, he wants to do extraordinary things."

"Yet there is more," he continued. "Jesus does not want to come merely in the little things of our lives, but also in our own littleness: in our experience of feeling weak, frail, inadequate, perhaps even 'messed up.'"

As he concluded his message, the pope said that the message of Christmas is not to be frightened by one's own littleness, but to allow Christ to enter into it.

"If he is present there," Francis asked, "what else do we need?"