Vatican
View from the Vatican
St. Peter's Square full of people to hear Pope Francis' Angelus Dec. 11

The crowd in St. Peter's Square attends Pope Francis' recitation of the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking the square at the Vatican Dec. 11. The pope blessed figurines of the baby Jesus brought by children for their Nativity scenes. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis isn't exactly known for exuding Christmas cheer.

During his first Christmas as pope in 2013, at his address to the Roman Curia, he used the occasion to warn that the Vatican was risking operating like a “heavy bureaucratic customs house" and chided curial officials for gossip.

That could be considered milquetoast for what awaited them in 2014, when some accused the pope of going full-on Grinch. That year he delivered a stinging assessment of what he diagnosed as 15 "diseases" he said plagued the work of the Vatican's central bureaucracy.

The pope went on to warn against careerism, the pursuit of worldly profit, rivalry and vainglory, and indifference to others. Ever since, the pope's consistent Christmas tradition has been to preach a message of humility during the annual address.

The simplicity that defined his style when he took over the office of the papacy a decade ago has been matched in his approach to marking the "happiest season of all."

Even the Vatican's Christmas tree this year is a testament to this reality.

Pope John Paul II began the tradition of putting a tree in St. Peter's Square in 1982, bringing some of the customs of his native Poland to Rome with him. The trees that have since historically graced the busy piazza have been centuries old silver fir trees cut down for the occasion. But no more.

Ahead of chopping down one for this season, local activists complained that it was inconsistent with the pope's concern for the environment — and he agreed, finding another live one instead. This year's tree is festive and serves the part, but one could hardly call it majestic.

Pope visits Nativity scene

Pope Francis visits the Nativity scene during his general audience in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican Dec. 21. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

When Francis celebrated his first Christmas as pope in 2013, war loomed large in the world and over his young papacy.

When he stepped out on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica on Christmas Day to offer the traditional urbi et orbi ("to the city and the world") message and blessing, at the top of his list of concerns was the raging conflict in Syria.

"Let us continue to ask the Lord to spare the beloved Syrian people further suffering, and to enable the parties in conflict to put an end to all violence," the pope prayed.

When he concluded that address, he offered a simple plea: "Let us ask [the Lord] to help us to be peacemakers each day, in our life, in our families, in our cities and nations, in the whole world," Francis said. "Let us allow ourselves to be moved by God’s goodness."

Now, as he prepares to deliver the 10th Christmas Day urbi et orbi of his papacy, another conflict will undoubtedly top his list of prayers — the ongoing war in Ukraine. In a Dec. 18 interview, the pope was asked about his Christmas wish, and he said it was simply "peace in the world."

Pope Francis' namesake, of course, is that of the 13th-century saint from Assisi, Italy, known for his own personal simplicity, concern for the poor and for the environment.

It was also St. Francis of Assisi who popularized the tradition of the Christmas Nativity scene, receiving permission from Pope Honorious III in 1223 to use a cave in Greccio, Italy, to recreate the setting of Christ's birth.

“The saintly friar did see clearly the need to visualize in a tangible manner the events surrounding Christ’s birth. He knew the need people have to see, and not just to hear about, the sacred events of their salvation," wrote Matthew Powell in his book *The Christmas Crèche*.

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Since 2018, one facet of the Vatican's Christmas celebrations has been an exhibit of 100 Presepi, a Roman tradition dating to 1976 that was moved to the Vatican five years ago and brings together more than 100 Nativity scenes from all over the world.

The exhibit underscores what Francis has said is the reason for the Christmas season: to reject a "society so often intoxicated by consumerism and hedonism, wealth and extravagance" and to focus on the Christ child, who "calls us to act soberly, in other words, in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, capable of seeing and doing what is essential."

In many ways, this year's Christmas in Rome finally resembles some normalcy after three years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tickets to the pope's Christmas Eve vigil Mass are in short supply and the Vatican's annual Christmas concert was back to its full programming last week.

But when the Christmas Eve "Midnight Mass" begins this year — at 7:30 p.m. to accommodate the 86-year-old pope — the trumpets will still sound and the bells may ring loudly, but one can anticipate Francis' message to be delivered in a lower,

simpler key, as it always has been since the very beginning — both in Bethlehem and since the very start of his papacy.