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Pope Francis sits in a wheelchair in front of a large nativity scene indoors

Pope Francis prays in front of the Nativity scene at the end of his general audience Dec. 28, 2022, in the Vatican audience hall. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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The birth of Jesus in a stable "shows us God's 'style,' which is closeness, compassion, and tenderness," Pope Francis told visitors and pilgrims at his weekly general audience.

On the church's calendar Christmas was not over when the pope held his audience Dec. 28, and he insisted it is important for Christians to use the season to contemplate the meaning of Jesus becoming human and being born into the poverty and simplicity of the manger.

"With this style of his, God draws us to himself," the pope said. "He does not take us by force, He does not impose his truth and justice on us. He wants to draw us with love, with tenderness."

Basing his Christmas reflections on the teachings of St. Francis de Sales, a bishop and doctor of the church, Francis announced at the audience that he was publishing an apostolic letter that day marking the 400th anniversary of the death of the French saint and theologian.

The letter, titled "Totum Amoris Est" ("Everything Pertains to Love"), would be published later the same day.

But rather than quoting from his apostolic letter, Francis quoted from St. Francis de Sales' meditations on Christmas and, especially, his focus on the love of God and on the poverty of Jesus' birth.

"Who is Jesus? Looking at the manger, looking at the cross, looking at his life, his simplicity, we can know who Jesus is," the pope said. "Jesus is the son of God who saves us by becoming man, stripping himself of his glory and humbling himself."

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In one of his letters to St. Jeanne Frances de Chantal, co-founder with St. Francis de Sales of the Visitation Sisters, the French saint wrote, "I would a hundred times rather see the dear Jesus in his crib, than all the kings of the world on their thrones."

Francis told people at the audience that the Gospel of Luke's description of the birth of Jesus and its focus on the manger "means that it is very important not only as a logistical detail, but as a symbolic element to understand what kind of messiah" Jesus is.

His birth in a stable and his death on a cross show the way "God draws us to himself," the pope said. "He does not take us by force, he does not impose his truth and justice on us. He wants to draw us with love, with tenderness."

Whatever kind of person God is dealing with, Francis said, "God has found the means to attract us however we are: with love. Not a possessive and selfish love, as unfortunately human love so often is. His love is pure gift, pure grace, it is all and only for us, for our good. And so, he draws us in, with this disarmed and disarming love."

St. Francis de Sales also writes about the simplicity, the real poverty of the manger, Francis said. "And, really, there is poverty there."

Writing to the Visitation Sisters, the saint said, "Do you see the baby Jesus in the crib? He accepts all the discomforts of that season, the bitter cold and everything that the Father lets happen to him."

"Here, dear brothers and sisters, is a great teaching, which comes to us from the child Jesus through the wisdom of St Francis de Sales," Francis said, and it is "to desire nothing and reject nothing, to accept everything that God sends us. But be careful! Always and only out of love, because God loves us and only ever wants our good."