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Pope Francis kisses a crucifix during the Good Friday Liturgy of the Lord's Passion in St. Peter

Pope Francis kisses a crucifix during the Good Friday Liturgy of the Lord's Passion in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican April 7, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Alone, without God, humanity is nothing, the papal preacher told Pope Francis and thousands of people gathered for the Liturgy of the Lord's Passion.

"As believers, it is our duty to show what there is behind or underneath" proclamations of relativism and nihilism, that is, to show the truth and new life brought by Christ's resurrection, Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa said in his homily April 7 in St. Peter's Basilica.

"The resurrection of Christ from the dead assures us, however, that if we repent, this path does not lead to defeat, but to that 'apotheosis of life' sought in vain elsewhere," the cardinal said.

Presided over by Pope Francis, the service on Good Friday commemorates Christ's passion and death on the cross.

The pope began the rite after a silent procession down the central nave.

As has become the norm, he arrived in a wheelchair and he sat in silent prayer before the main altar. Customarily, he would have knelt to lie prostrate on the floor in prayer, a sign of adoration and penance. However, ongoing difficulty with his knee has forced him to forego that practice; even last year, he stood in veneration.

During the veneration of the cross, after the homily, the pope stood at his chair wearing a red chasuble and prayed in silence before kissing the cross. The cross was then brought before the main altar for veneration, and a long line of cardinals and other faithful processed before the cross to bow or genuflect and kiss Christ's figure. The pope then held the cross aloft briefly.

Following tradition, the homily was delivered by Cardinal Cantalamessa, preacher of the papal household.

He reflected on the consequences of philosophies that have proclaimed a fatalistic, hopeless form of the "death of God" in a "de-Christianized Western world."

No matter what form or name those philosophies take, he said, "the common denominator is a total relativism in every field -- ethics, language, philosophy, art and, of course, religion."

"Nothing more is solid; everything is liquid or even vaporous. At the time of Romanticism, people used to bask in melancholy, today in nihilism!" the cardinal said.

"But history, literature and our own personal experience tell us" that "there is a transcendent truth that no historical account or philosophical reasoning could convey to us," he said. "God knows how proud we are and has come to our help by emptying himself in front of us."

Cardinal Cantalamessa said, the Good Friday liturgy is not to convince atheists that God is not dead. "It is to keep believers -- who knows, perhaps even just one or two university students -- from being drawn into this vortex of nihilism which is the true 'black hole' of the spiritual universe."

"For two thousand years, the church has announced and celebrated, on this day, the death of the Son of God on the cross," he said. However, "at every Mass, after the consecration, we say or sing: 'We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again.'"

Pope Francis had been scheduled later that night to preside over the Stations of the Cross in Rome's Colosseum.

However, the Vatican press office told reporters late afternoon April 7 that "due to the intense cold these days" the pope would be following the nighttime ceremony from his residence, the Domus Sanctae Marthae, "joining the prayers of those gathered with the Diocese of Rome at the Colosseum."

Weather forecasts estimated the late evening temperature would be around 52 degrees Fahrenheit (11 degrees Celsius). The evening temperatures for Good Friday in mid-April last year were also in the 50s.

However, this year, the pope was released April 1 from the hospital where he had spent three nights for a respiratory infection, and the pope had a slight cough and rough voice when he recited some of the prayers at the Good Friday liturgy.

The theme for the meditations for the 14 stations was "Voices of peace in a world at war." The commentaries and prayers were inspired by what Pope Francis has been hearing from people suffering from a lack of peace during his apostolic journeys and other occasions. Several dicasteries of the Roman Curia compiled the texts.

The text of the commentary and prayers on the 14 Stations of the Cross was published late April 7 on the Vatican website. It included "voices of peace" from young people from Central America and North Africa, migrants, a consecrated woman who witnessed the December 2013 massacres in the Central African Republic and young people from Ukraine and Russia.