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Pope Francis sits in a wheelchair rolling past a crowd of people, turning to the side to rest his

Pope Francis greets Vatican employees and their families and gives chocolates to the children during his annual pre-Christmas meeting in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)



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Like God's decision to be born in a manger tucked away from the world, good deeds done in silence can express God's love wherever they are performed, Pope Francis said.

Delivering his Christmas greeting to Vatican employees and their families Dec. 21, the pope thanked them for their work, much of which is conducted behind the scenes and "may seem insignificant," but "instead offer a service to the church and society."

"Goodness, even when it is hidden and invisible, grows without making noise," he said. "It multiplies unexpectedly and spreads the scent of joy."

Francis reflected on the context of Jesus' birth to Mary and St. Joseph, "who are not in the spotlight," but "in the poverty of a stable because there was no room for them at the inn."

Jesus, he said, "is the God of the little ones and the humble, and, with him, we all learn the way to enter the kingdom of God: not [with] an ostentatious and artificial religiosity, but by becoming small like children."

Many Vatican employees brought their young children to the audience. After delivering his speech, the pope passed through the crowd in the Paul VI Audience Hall in a wheelchair, taking his time to greet the families and handing out small chocolate Santas to the children.

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In his speech, Francis urged each family to embrace the hiddenness and simplicity surrounding Jesus' birth, particularly when "today we live in a time that sometimes seems obsessed with appearance."

"It is the age of makeup, everyone puts on makeup, not only on their faces but also on their souls, and this is bad," he said, noting its especially harmful effects through social media.

Francis related the tendency to focus on appearance rather than substance to wanting precious drinking glasses without caring whether the wine served in them is of good quality or not.

"But in the family, appearances and masks do not matter, or are short-lived," he said. "What matters is that the 'good wine' of love, tenderness and mutual understanding is not lacking."

Rather than through grand, flashy gestures, God expresses himself through "closeness, compassion and tenderness," the pope added. "Love, we know well, does not make noise. We live it in the hiddenness and in the smallness of daily acts, in the attention we can exchange with one another."

Francis asked each family to be mindful of the small acts of gratitude in their households and encouraged them to pause before a Nativity scene, where "by looking at the crib, we can imagine the care, the tenderness of Mary and Joseph for the child that was born."