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Pope Francis kisses a figurine of the baby Jesus during Christmas Eve Mass in St. Peter's Basil

Pope Francis kisses a figurine of the baby Jesus during Christmas Eve Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 24, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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The message of Christmas is that Jesus changed the world through his love, rather than through worldly power, said Pope Francis as he marked the start of the holiday at the Vatican.

"He is not the god of accomplishment, but the God of Incarnation. He does not eliminate injustice from above by a show of power, but from below, by a show of love," said Francis during a Dec. 24 Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica. "He does not burst on the scene with limitless power, but descends to the narrow confines of our lives. He does not shun our frailties, but makes them his own."

"Tonight, love changes history," said the pope during his Christmas homily. "Make us believe, Lord, in the power of your love, so different from the power of the world."

The pope celebrated his 11th Christmas Eve at the Vatican by reflecting on the Incarnation — saying that by becoming flesh, Christ took on human frailty in order to demonstrate his love for the world.

"Why did he go to such lengths?," Francis asked. "Because he cares for us, because he loves us to the point that he considers us more precious than all else. Dear brother, dear sister, to God…you are not a number, but a face. Your name is written on his heart."

The pope went on to caution that Christmas should not be celebrated in "pagan" terms, "linked to power, worldly success and the idolatry of consumerism" or by mistaking God as a "powerful potentate in the sky."

God "waves no magic wand; he is no god of commerce who promises 'everything all at once,'" Francis insisted. "He does not save us by pushing a button, but draws near us, in order to change our world from within."

The pope was joined by some 30 cardinals, over a dozen bishops, more than 200 priests and an estimated 6,500 mass-goers. Francis, who turned 87 on Dec. 17 and recently recovered from a bout with bronchitis that forced him to cancel a series of public events due to an inability to speak, spoke with ease as he presided over the liturgy.

During his 12-minute homily, the pope repeatedly emphasized the closeness of God, as demonstrated through Christ's own humanity.

"God so greatly desires to embrace our lives that, infinite though he is, he becomes finite for our sake. In his greatness, he chooses to become small; in his righteousness, he submits to our injustice," said Francis. "This is the wonder of Christmas: not a mixture of sappy emotions and worldly contentment, but the unprecedented tenderness of a God who saves the world by becoming incarnate."

Many people, said the pope, feel inadequate or unworthy of receiving the love of God, especially at Christmas.

"Today, though, please, let Jesus take the initiative," he pleaded. "He says to you, 'For your sake, I became flesh; for your sake, I became just like you.' So why remain caught up in your troubles?"

"He became flesh," the pope continued. "He is looking not for your achievements but for your open and trusting heart. In him, you will rediscover who you truly are: a beloved son or daughter of God. Now you can believe it, for tonight the Lord was born to light up your life; his eyes are alight with love for you."

While the atmosphere at the annual Christmas Mass was festive — with red poinsettias and gold and white flower bouquets adorning the basilica, along with the sounds of bells and trumpets — Francis acknowledged that the shadow of war loomed large over this Christmas.

"Tonight, our hearts are in Bethlehem, where the Prince of Peace is once more rejected by the futile logic of war, by the clash of arms that even today prevents him from finding room in the world," said the pope.

Earlier in the day on Dec. 24, during his weekly Sunday Angelus prayer from the window of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, the pope asked Christians to mark the holiday with simplicity and in solidarity with those suffering from war, particularly in Israel, Palestine and Ukraine.

"May the God who took for himself a human heart infuse humanity into the hearts of men," the pope prayed.