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Pope Francis greets people at the conclusion of Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Jan. 1, 2025, the feast of Mary, Mother of God, and World Peace Day. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Marking the feast of Mary, Mother of God, and the start of the new year, Pope Francis renewed his appeal for a "firm commitment" to respect all human life worldwide.

"May we learn to care for every child born of a woman, above all by protecting, like Mary, the precious gift of life: life in the womb, the lives of children, the lives of the suffering, the poor, the elderly, the lonely and the dying," he said in his homily during Mass in St. Peter's Basilica Jan. 1.

"All of us are invited to take up the summons that flows from the maternal heart of Mary: we are called to cherish life, to care for wounded lives — so many wounded lives, so many — to restore dignity to the lives of everyone" because it is the basis for building a culture of peace, he said, highlighting that the feast also marks the World Day of Peace.

The pope's message for the World Day of Peace was published in December and is shared with heads of state around the world by Vatican ambassadors. In it, Francis called on all nations to eliminate the death penalty, to divert a fixed percentage of arms spending to a global fund to fight hunger and climate change, to cancel the international debt of developing nations and to respect human life.

After praying the Angelus in St. Peter's Square following Mass, the pope urged the leaders of countries with Christian roots and traditions "to set a good example by canceling or reducing as much as possible the debts of the poorest countries." The Jubilee Year focuses on the "remission of debts" and it also "asks us to translate this remission on the social level, so that no person, no family, no people will be crushed by debt."

He also expressed his "grateful appreciation to all those in many areas of conflict who are working for dialogue and negotiations. We pray that fighting will cease on every front and there will be a decisive aim for peace and reconciliation."

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While Francis presided over the morning liturgy and gave the homily, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, was the main celebrant at the altar. He was joined by Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister.

The pope took a moment before the Mass to pose for a photo with more than a dozen young people dressed as the three kings who visited Jesus. In Germany, Austria and other regions of Europe, children known as "sternsingers," or star singers, sing carols and raise money for charity between Christmas and Epiphany each year. And, after the Mass, Francis spent nearly 10 minutes greeting children and handing them chocolate Santas as his aide pushed him in his wheelchair down the central aisle of the basilica.

In his homily, the pope reiterated his proposal in his peace day message for "a firm commitment to respect the dignity of human life from conception to natural death, so that each person can cherish his or her own life and all may look with hope to the future."

"Let us entrust this new year to Mary, Mother of God. May we learn, like her, to discover God's greatness in the little things of life," he said.

God chose to act "through littleness and hiddenness" by coming into the world as a tiny helpless child born of a woman in a manger to be "one of us and, for this, he is able to save us," the pope said.

"Jesus never yielded to the temptation of performing great signs and imposing himself on others, as the devil had suggested," he said. Instead, "by the frailty of his humanity and his concern for the weak and vulnerable, Jesus shows us the face of God," who is always near, compassionate and merciful "to those suffering in body and spirit."

Mary reminds the faithful "that Jesus came in the flesh, and that we encounter him above all in our daily life, in our own frail humanity and that of all those whom we encounter each day," the pope said.

"If he, who is the Son of God, became so small as to be held in a mother's arms, cared for and nursed, this means that today, too, he comes among us in all those

who need similar care: in every sister and brother we meet, in everyone who needs our attention and tender care," he said.

The pope asked the faithful to entrust to Mary "this new Jubilee Year. Let us entrust to her our questions, our worries, our sufferings, our joys and all the concerns that we bear in our hearts" and to "entrust to her the whole world, so that hope may be reborn and peace may finally spring up for all the peoples of the earth."