Opinion
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Pope Leo XIV gives his homily during Christmas Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 24, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The "Pope Leo" difference made itself felt anew over Christmas.

As we have seen before, Leo XIV's words were little different from what his predecessors would say. In his midnight Mass homily, the pope quoted a sermon his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI had delivered at midnight Mass in 2012: "To heal our blindness, the Lord chooses to reveal himself in each human being, who reflect his true image, according to a plan of love begun at the creation of the world. As long as the night of error obscures this providential truth, then 'there is no room for others either, for children, for the poor, for the stranger.' "

He quoted his immediate predecessor Pope Francis' midnight Mass homily in 2024: "The Nativity of Jesus rekindles in us the 'gift and task of bringing hope wherever hope has been lost,' because 'with him, joy flourishes; with him, life changes; with him, hope does not disappoint.' "

And, of course, he quoted from his spiritual father, St. Augustine: "As St. Augustine observed, 'Human pride weighed you down so heavily that only divine humility could raise you up again.' While a distorted economy leads us to treat human beings as mere merchandise, God becomes like us, revealing the infinite dignity of every person. While humanity seeks to become 'god' in order to dominate others, God chooses to become man in order to free us from every form of slavery. Will this love be enough to change our history?"

Leo's sermon was beautiful and it was similar to the kinds of sermons we Catholics have been hearing at Christmastime from our popes for decades.

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The thing about Leo is that it isn't just us Catholics who take note, but non-Catholics also. Damon Silvers, longtime policy adviser at the AFL-CIO and now a visiting professor at University College London, is not a Catholic. He posted a link to an article in the Catholic News Herald about the pope's midnight Mass homily. That story began: "If people refuse to make room for others — like the poor, children and

the stranger — then they also refuse to make room for God, Pope Leo XIV said as he celebrated the birth of Jesus. 'Where there is room for the human person, there is room for God,' the pope said in his homily Dec. 24 as he celebrated the nighttime liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica."

Above the link to the article, Silvers said on Facebook: "I have been so impressed by what Pope Leo has said this Christmas. Some of it has been deeply Christian (not surprisingly!) in a way I don't believe as theology but this statement I believe to be a true one about the nature of God and God's relationship to us, to the extent we can comprehend who and what God is."

Then, on the 26th, I was walking my dog Damiana in the afternoon and saw a neighbor who is also not a Catholic. We discussed various things, including Leo's first Christmas, and my friend observed, "You know, your pope is the pope the world needs right now. I don't know if he is what your church needs but he is what the world needs."

Too often, interreligious dialogue descends into a search for the lowest common ethical denominator. But here were two non-Catholics moved by the pope's words as he celebrated one of the great mysteries and dogmas of our faith: the Incarnation. His words reached to something deeper than ethics, to our understanding of the human person. That understanding may be arresting to all, but it is difficult to imagine it even occurring to people except for the revelation received in the Covenant with the Jewish people and in the person of Jesus Christ.

Editor's note: *This is a special publication from NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters' weekly newsletter, where he covers a wide range of topics and recommends other articles from a variety of news outlets. You can get this newsletter delivered to your inbox every Tuesday by signing up here.*