

# Christmas is time to feel God's closeness, experience peace, pope says

**By Cindy Wooden**

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VATICAN CITY – Celebrating the first Christmas since his election, Pope Francis preached the goodness and tenderness of God, and prayed that men and women around the world would allow God's grace to transform them into peacemakers.

"Let us allow our hearts to be touched, let us allow ourselves to be warmed by the tenderness of God; we need his caress," the pope said Dec. 25, standing on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica and addressing an estimated 70,000 people in the square below.

"God is peace," the pope said. "Let us ask him to help us to be peacemakers each day, in our life, in our families, in our cities and nations, in the whole world. Let us allow ourselves to be moved by God's goodness."

"My hope is that everyone will feel God's closeness, live in his presence, love him and adore him," Pope Francis said before delivering his Christmas blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world).

Instead of reading Christmas greetings in more than 50 languages — from Chinese to Swahili — as his predecessors had done, Pope Francis spoke only in Italian.

As is traditional, his Christmas address included prayers and pleas for peace in war-torn and tense countries around the world, including Syria, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Israel and Palestine and Iraq, where a car bomb exploded outside a church a few hours earlier, killing at least a dozen people.

Looking at the Christ child, "our thoughts turn to those children who are the most vulnerable victims of wars," he said. Offering a prayer, he asked God to "look upon the many children who are kidnapped, wounded and killed in armed conflicts, and all those who are robbed of their childhood and forced to become soldiers."

"Wars shatter and hurt so many lives," he said.

"True peace is not a balance of opposing forces," he said, and it is not "a lovely facade" simply covering conflicts and divisions. Rather, "peace calls for daily commitment — it's homemade — starting from God's gift, from the grace which he has given us in Jesus Christ."

Departing from his prepared text, Pope Francis asked nonbelievers who feel unable

to pray to “enlarge their hearts” by ardently desiring peace.

Pope Francis also prayed for the elderly, for battered women, for the sick, for migrants and refugees, for those persecuted for their faith, for the victims of human trafficking and for the conversion of traffickers.

The pope’s Christmas celebrations began in the crisp air of a cloudless winter night when he celebrated Christmas Mass Dec. 24 in St. Peter’s Basilica, starting his homily with the first line from the night’s reading from Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

The reading gave the pope an opportunity to combine reflections on the Christmas symbolism of light and a verb he has emphasized since his first Mass at pope: “to walk.”

Thousands of people packed into the basilica for the Mass and hundreds stood outside watching on big video screens; already in November people were being told there were no more of the free tickets left.

Pope Francis carried a statue of the baby Jesus to a golden manger in front of the altar at the beginning of Mass. After the liturgy, walking behind children from Italy, the Philippines, Argentina, Congo and Lebanon, he carried the statue to a Nativity scene.

In his homily, the pope said that from the moment God called Abraham, believers in the one God have been a walking, pilgrim people, and through all the wandering, God has never left his people’s side.

“Yet on the part of the people,” he said, “there are times of both light and darkness, fidelity and infidelity, obedience and rebellion; times of being a pilgrim people and times of being a people adrift.”

In individual stories as well, “there are both bright and dark moments,” the pope said. “If we love God and our brothers and sisters, we walk in the light; but if our heart is closed, if we are dominated by pride, deceit, self-seeking, then darkness falls within us and around us.”

The glad tidings of Christmas reveal that God has broken into the world with light and salvation, he said. “Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, true man and true God,” has entered human history and is sharing the human journey.

“Jesus is love incarnate,” Pope Francis said. “He is not simply a teacher of wisdom, he is not an ideal for which we strive while knowing that we are hopelessly distant from it. He is the meaning of life and history who has pitched his tent in our midst.”

The biblical Christmas story tells how the shepherds were the first to hear the news of Jesus’ birth and the first to run to see him. They were first, the pope said, because in social standing they were among the last. They were the ones outside town staying up all night keeping watch over the flocks.

With the shepherds, he said, “let us pause before the Child, let us pause in silence.”

"Together with them, let us thank the Lord for having given Jesus to us, and with them let us raise from the depths of our hearts the praises of his fidelity: 'We bless you, Lord God most high, who lowered yourself for our sake. You are immense, and you made yourself small; you are rich and you made yourself poor; you are all-powerful and you made yourself vulnerable.'"

As people continue their journey through the world, even when it is dark, Pope Francis said Christmas is a reminder that they do not have to be afraid. "Our Father is patient, he loves us, he gives us Jesus to guide us on the way which leads to the promised land. Jesus is the light who brightens the darkness."

While the pope added only a few improvised words to his prepared text, one phrase he added was a familiar refrain of his pontificate: The Lord is merciful; "our Father always forgives us. He is our peace."

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