

Pope says joy of Christmas season from Jesus' presence

VATICAN CITY – Consecrating a new parish church, blessing figurines of the baby Jesus and reciting the Angelus with visitors in St. Peter's Square, Pope Benedict XVI said the joy of the season comes from knowing Jesus is present among people and can work through them.

The pope began Dec. 16 by blessing Rome's new Our Lady of the Rosary Church, sprinkling the building with holy water, filling its corners with incense smoke and anointing its altar with oil.

While the third Sunday of Advent, called Gaudete Sunday, includes a special invitation to rejoice, he said, "in truth, all of Advent is a call to joy because 'the Lord is coming,' because he comes to save us."

Preparing for Christmas, the pope said, the Mass readings "constantly repeat that we must wake from the sleep of habit and mediocrity; we must abandon sadness and discouragement; we must strengthen our hearts because the Lord is near."

Pope Benedict told the parishioners that all their hard work and sacrifice in building the church and worrying over every detail should be a symbol of the sacrifice and care with which they prepare their hearts for the Lord's coming and their lives for living as Christians.

"The living community is more sacred than the material temple we consecrate," the pope said. "And to build this living, spiritual temple – which is you – there is need for much prayer" and active participation in the liturgy, catechesis and the charitable and cultural activities that the parish offers.

"May the care we show for the material building – sprinkling it with holy water, anointing it with oil and filling it with incense – be a sign and a stimulus for a more intense care in defending and promoting the temple of the person, which is formed by you, dear parishioners," Pope Benedict said.

Returning to the Vatican for the midday recitation of the Angelus, the pope told people in St. Peter's Square that the joy of Advent and Christmas comes from knowing that God, in Jesus Christ, became one of us.

"Christian joy arises from this certainty: God is near, he is with me, he is with us in joy and sorrow, in health and sickness, as a friend and faithful spouse," the pope said.

Pope Benedict said the fact that Christian joy remains despite sorrow and struggle can be seen in the life of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who had long periods of feeling that God had abandoned her, but she continued to smile and to take God's love to the poor and the dying.

"Yes, joy enters the hearts of those who place themselves at the service of the small and the poor. In those who love that way, God takes up residence and the soul rejoices," he said.

"If, instead, one makes happiness an idol, he takes the wrong path, and the joy of which Jesus speaks is truly difficult to find," the pope said.

At the end of the audience, Pope Benedict blessed statues of the baby Jesus that children brought to the square in preparation for placing them in Nativity scenes at home and at school.

While he wished the children a Merry Christmas, he asked their parents, priests and teachers "to collaborate with enthusiasm for the Christian education of the little ones."