

‘Silent Night’ at the Vatican

Exiting St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican just after midnight on Christmas, the young woman next to me hummed softly to her infant. The strains of “Silent Night” were not hard to discern, as she comforted her baby. It made me recall the Nativity scene we had just passed while exiting the Christmas Mass in the basilica, where Pope Benedict XVI had placed the figure of the baby Jesus and blessed the crèche at the end of the closing procession, to great applause.

I thought about Mary on that first Christmas night, and how she might have hummed softly in Jesus’ ear, as he fell asleep. How different his humble beginnings were, and yet the gentle care of a mother is universal. Jesus is God, but he started out as a little baby, meek, and in need of a mother’s and father’s love.

Nativity scenes were visible throughout Rome during Christmas week – not just available for purchase in all sizes and varieties in the shops around St. Peter’s Square. With great fanfare, including a concert with musicians and two choirs, the Vatican unveiled its outdoor scene in the square in front of the basilica.

Hundreds crowded the barricades to listen to the carols – mostly in Italian, but with occasional English and German tunes – and await the drop of curtains to reveal the 15-foot-tall figures of Joseph, Mary and the shepherds. Others in the square waiting in line as early as 2:30 p.m. for the chance to enter the basilica at 8:30 for the 10 p.m. “midnight” Mass were able to hear the concert, but not see the unveiling. However, if they looked up at the right moment, they might have seen a lone figure silhouetted for less than a minute at the window of the papal apartment, where Pope Benedict held a candle as the Nativity scene was revealed.

Notably, the manger was empty, since the Christ child had not yet arrived. The wise men were not yet present, either; tradition dictates that they will arrive later, according to Scripture. The Christ child was present in the scene on Christmas morning when the pope delivered his “Urbi et Orbi” (to the city and to the world) address from the balcony of St. Peter’s on Christmas day, in which he reminded the world that “the Son of the Virgin Mary is born for everyone; he is the Savior of all.”



(CR staff | Christopher Gunty)

Jesus Christ is the proof that God has heard his people's cry to "come and save us," the pope said, in Italian. "Let us turn our gaze anew to the grotto of Bethlehem. The Child whom we contemplate is our salvation! He has brought to the world a universal message of reconciliation and peace. Let us open our hearts to Him; let us receive Him into our lives." He went on to deliver Christmas greetings in 65 languages, including this, in English: "May the birth of the Prince of Peace remind the world where its true happiness lies; and may your hearts be filled with hope and joy, for the Savior has been born for us."

This message is why we keep our Nativity scenes in our churches up for a couple weeks after Christmas. It is to remind us that Christmas is not one day, but a season: It reminds us that the message of Christ's Incarnation is not about a child who comes to us for one moment, but a Savior who is with us even now, transforming our lives on an ongoing basis.

As Pope Benedict reflected in his homily at the Christmas Mass, "In the child born in the stable at Bethlehem, we can, as it were, touch and caress God."

Let us do that, and allow him also to touch our lives, so we can better serve him and our fellow people in this new year.

Christopher Gunty is associate publisher/editor of The Catholic Review.