

Pope defends migrants, calls for peace in Christmas message

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Pope Francis ushered in Christmas celebrations for the world's 1.3 billion Catholics on Tuesday, saying the celebration of Jesus's birth reminded humanity how "God continues to love us all, even the worst of us".

Pope Francis gestures as he arrives to deliver the "Urbi et Orbi" Christmas Day message from the main balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, December 25, 2019. REUTERS/Yara Nardi

Rome: Pope Francis urged the world to let the light of Christmas pierce the "darkness in human hearts" that leads to religious persecution, social injustice, armed conflicts and fear of migrants.

In his "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) Christmas Day message, the 83-year-old pope called for peace in the Holy Land, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Venezuela, Ukraine and several African countries caught up in conflicts.

The common thread of his address to tens of thousands of people in St. Peter's Square and millions watching or listening around the world was that change starts in the hearts of individuals.

"There is darkness in human hearts, yet the light of Christ is greater still," Francis said, as he marked the seventh Christmas of his pontificate.

"There is darkness in personal, family and social relationships, but the light of Christ is greater. There is darkness in economic, geopolitical and ecological conflicts, yet greater still is the light of Christ," he said.

Francis singled out the persecution of Christians by militant groups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, asking God to console those who suffer for their faith.

On Dec. 1, at least 14 people were shot dead in an attack on a church in eastern Burkina Faso, where an Islamist insurgency has ignited ethnic and religious tensions.

"BRIGHTEN THE DARKNESS"

Francis, who has been scorned by populist politicians because of his defense of refugees and migrants, dedicated a section of his address to their plight.

"It is injustice that makes them cross deserts and seas that become cemeteries. It is injustice that forces them to endure unspeakable forms of abuse, enslavement of every kind and torture in inhumane detention camps," Francis said.

This month, Francis called for the closing of migrant detention camps in Libya.

"It is injustice that turns them away from places where they might have hope for a dignified life, but instead find themselves before walls of indifference," he said.

Francis said that while there were many huge problems in the world, people did not have to look far to correct injustices. They could make a difference in their own communities as a start to healing all the "suffering members of our human

familyâ€•.

â€œMay (God) soften our often stony and self-centered hearts, and make them channels of his love. May he bring his smile, through our poor faces, to all the children of the world: to those who are abandoned and those who suffer violence,â€• Francis said.

To underscore his message, the two cardinals Francis chose to join him on the basilicaâ€™s central balcony were Renato Martino, president emeritus of the Vaticanâ€™s immigration office, and Konrad Krajewski, the papal almoner who distributes aid to Romeâ€™s poor and homeless.

â€œThrough our frail hands, may he clothe those who have nothing to wear, give bread to the hungry and heal the sick,â€• he said, adding that through friendship, everyone could be close to the elderly, the lonely, migrants and marginalized people.

â€œOn this joyful Christmas Day, may he bring his tenderness to all and brighten the darkness of this world,â€• he said.

- Reuters, AFP