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Francis accents 'vulnerability' of God

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 24, 2013 NCR Today
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In his first Christmas homily as pope, Francis tonight underlined the ?vulnerability? embraced by God in choosing to become a poor human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Pope Francis celebrated the Vatican?s traditional Christmas vigil Mass this evening in St. Peter?s Basilica, with the Vatican reporting that it had received a record number of requests from people seeking to take part in the Mass.

Francis? homily was notable among other things for its brevity, running to scarcely more than 700 words. For the most part, it seemed, Francis was content to let the significance of the Christmas liturgy speak for itself.

The pope opened by saying that Christmas is about a burst of light in a dark night, and that the interplay of light and dark is characteristic of the spiritual journey.

?If we love God and our brothers and sisters, we walk in the light,? the pope said.

?If our heart is closed, if we are dominated by pride, deceit, self-seeking, then darkness falls within us and around us,? he said.

Jesus, Francis said, made visible ?the grace, the mercy, the tenderness? of God the Father.

Reflecting on the traditional Christmas story of the birth of Christ, Francis made a point of noting that the shepherds were the first to receive the news of Christ?s birth.

?They were the first,? he said, ?because they were among the last, the outcast.?

Francis then offered words of praise and gratitude to God for entering the human condition in order to bring salvation.

?We bless you, Lord God, most high, who lowered yourself for our sake,? Francis said.

?You are immense, and you made yourself small,? he said. ?You are rich, and you made yourself poor; you are all-powerful and you made yourself vulnerable.?

At the end of the homily, Francis emphasized the mercy of the Lord, offering a version of his signature phrase that "God always forgives us."

Tomorrow, Francis is scheduled to deliver the traditional papal *Urbi et Orbi* remarks, ?To the City and to the World,? at noon Rome time.

One American footnote to tonight?s Mass is that the deacons who assisted the pope and the cardinals in

celebrating the liturgy came from the North American College, the residence for American seminarians in Rome.

*(Follow John Allen on Twitter:**@JohnLAllenJr**)*

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