

# Christmas brings few 'silent nights' to Vatican

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In early December, a 14-wheel flatbed truck pulled into a Vatican parking lot after a European journey. With the arrival of Pope John Paul II's Christmas tree, the yuletide season was officially underway.

Even as the truck's gearbox was cooling down, the pope said that Christmas was a perfect period for reflection, a time to create "a climate of silence and prayer." But at the Vatican, 'tis also the season of ceremonies, crowds and gift-giving, perhaps best described to the accompaniment of Christmas carols.

"O tannenbaum, O tannenbaum ..."  
Looking down from his apartment window, the pope can see workers string bulbs on one of the world's tallest Christmas trees. This year's came from a Slovakian forest and stands about 75 feet. For Romans, it's the only giant Christmas tree in town: the "green" city government opted not to put one up this year as an ecology statement.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly ..."  
The Vatican's marble hallways are decked with paintings all year long, and holly wouldn't blend into the decor. But here and there a nativity scene is set up. Anything more lavish would show a "lack of seriousness," as one Curia member put it. Insiders say the pope's own apartment, by contrast, is packed with traditional Polish decorations that remain for several weeks after Christmas.

"... and a partridge in a pear tree."  
That may be one of the few gifts the pope doesn't receive during the Christmas season. Santa rings daily for the pontiff at the Bronze Doors, leaving letters and packages with Swiss Guards and papal aides. There are fresh-baked sweets, children's art, clothing and religious items — all of them opened by the papal household, and many donated to centers for the poor and homeless.

"He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake ..."  
The pope gets to play Santa Claus, too. Vatican employees receive a Christmas bonus of sparkling wine and Italian "panettone" cake. In 1992 the pope replaced the panettone with a copy of the new catechism. Some workers wonder whether the pope's new book, or perhaps the new CD of his rosary recital, will be in their stockings this Christmas.

"... to hear sleigh bells in the snow ..."  
The last time it snowed heavily in Rome was in the late 1980s, so you can forget about sleigh rides. But St. Peter's Square is a starting point for the traditional horse-pulled carriages that clatter down the city's cobblestoned streets. Passengers hear the blare of car horns, not bells; prices start at about \$50 for a half-hour jaunt.

"Away in a manger, no crib for his bed ..."  
It was the pope's idea to erect a nativity scene next to the Christmas tree. Unveiled on Christmas Eve, it is the size

of a house and acts as a magnet for tourists and Romans. The baby Jesus lies on a bed of straw; next year, however, the Vatican could offer a room at its own inn. Just behind St. Peter's Basilica looms the nearly completed Domus Sanctae Marthae, which will provide 110 two-room suites for visiting prelates — and perhaps some lay guests.

"... and heaven and nature sing ..."  
The pope was to join hundreds at the second annual Vatican Christmas concert Dec. 16, starring pop star Peter Gabriel, operatic soprano Renata Scotto and blind guitarist Jose Feliciano, with choral and orchestral renditions of Christmas favorites. Bring your billfold: Ticket prices range from \$125 to \$625, with proceeds going to Rome church-building projects.

"... the goose is getting fat, please to put a penny in the old man's hat."  
The Vatican has no Salvation Army Santas and allows no begging on its premises. But beneficence is in the air: The pope's own "apostolic charity office" helps out families at Christmas with rent payments and heating bills. A few steps away from St. Peter's Square, Mother Teresa's hospice for the poor celebrates with a big meal on Christmas Day — the pope has even dropped in to eat with them.

"Go, tell it on the mountain ..."  
Angels may have announced Christ's birth to shepherds; today, the news is repeated in TV broadcasts beamed around the world by satellite. The pope's Christmas Mass at midnight is seen in more than 50 countries each year, with a potential viewing audience of 2 billion.

All this means a hectic yuletide countdown for many at the Vatican, a crescendo of ding-a-ling, tra-la-la and rum-a-tum-tum. When the big day arrives, all a red-robed cardinal may want for Christmas is to throw a few chestnuts on an open fire and settle into a silent night.

The Word Of  
God Came As  
A Baby To  
Dwell Among Us  
Oh, Come Let Us  
Adore Him.

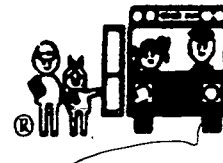
John 1:1-18

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