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Pope Leo XIV greets members of the National Association of Italian Municipalities during an audience at the Vatican Dec. 29, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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All power must be built on responsibility and service, Pope Leo XIV told local government leaders.

"For any authority to be able to express these characteristics, it is necessary to embody the virtues of humility, honesty and sharing," as well as to listen to others, he said during an audience at the Vatican Dec. 29 with members of the National Association of Italian Municipalities.

"Indeed, it is a matter of paying attention to the needs of families and individuals, taking special care of the most vulnerable, for the good of all," he said.

The Christmas season is a reminder of how "the incarnation of the Son of God brings us face to face with a child, whose gentle fragility clashes with the arrogance of King Herod," he said.

Referring to the Dec. 28 Feast of the Holy Innocents, which commemorates the king's order to kill all male children under 2 years of age in Bethlehem, the pope said the killing of the innocents "not only means the loss of a future for society, but is also a manifestation of inhumane power, which does not know the beauty of love because it ignores the dignity of human life."

"On the contrary, the birth of the Lord reveals the most authentic aspect of all power, which is first and foremost responsibility and service," he said.

Leo underlined several challenges facing cities that must be confronted, including "forms of marginalization, violence and loneliness" as well as "the scourge of gambling, which ruins many families."

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"We cannot forget other forms of loneliness that many people suffer from: mental disorders, depression, cultural and spiritual poverty, and social abandonment. They are signs that show how much hope is needed," he said. "To bear effective witness

to it, politics is called upon to weave authentically human relationships among citizens, promoting social peace."

"Social cohesion and civic harmony require, first and foremost, listening to the least and the poor," Leo said, reminding his audience of Pope Francis' warning that without that commitment, "democracy atrophies, turns into a slogan, a formality; it loses its representative character and becomes disembodied, since it leaves out the people in their daily struggle for dignity, in the building of their future."

"Both in the face of difficulties and in opportunities for development, I urge you to become masters of dedication to the common good, fostering a social alliance for hope," Leo said.

He also encouraged them to "have the courage to offer hope to people, planning together the best future for your lands, from the perspective of integral human promotion."