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Celebration of first Vespers of the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, and “Te Deum” of thanksgiving for the past year

This afternoon, in the Vatican Basilica, the Holy Father Francis presided over the first Vespers of the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, followed by the traditional singing of the “Te Deum” hymn at the conclusion of the civil year. At the end of the celebration, Pope Francis visited the Nativity scene in Saint Peter’s Square.

The following is the homily delivered by the Pope during the celebration of Vespers:

Homily of the Holy Father

Faith enables us to live this time in a different way compared to a worldly mentality. Faith in Jesus Christ, God incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary, gives a new way of feeling time and life. I would summarize it in two words: *gratitude* and *hope*.

One might say, “But isn’t this what everyone does on the last evening of the year? Everyone gives thanks, everyone hopes, believers and non-believers alike”. Perhaps it may seem that way, and if only it were! But in reality, worldly gratitude, worldly hope are evident: they lack the essential dimension that is the relationship with the Other and with others, with God and with our brethren. They are focused on the self, on its interests, and so they are very short of breath, they do not go beyond satisfaction and optimism.

Instead, in this Liturgy one breathes an entirely different atmosphere: that of praise, of wonder, of gratitude. And this happens not because of the majesty of the Basilica, not because of the lights and the hymns – these things are, rather, the consequence – but because of the Mystery that the antiphon of the first Psalm expressed thus: “O admirable exchange: the creator of human-kind, taking on a living body, was worthy to be born of a virgin, and ... has given us his deity in abundance”. This admirable exchange!

The liturgy lets us enter into the sentiments of the Church; and the Church, so to speak, learns them from the Virgin Mother.

Let us think of what the gratitude in the heart of Mary would have been as she watched the newborn Jesus. It is an experience that only a mother can have, and yet in her, in the Mother of God, it has a unique, incomparable depth. Mary knows, she alone together with Joseph, where the Child comes from. And yet he is there, he breathes, he cries, he needs to eat, to be swaddled, cared for. The Mystery leaves room for gratitude, which flourishes in the contemplation of the gift, of gratuity, whereas it is stifled by the eagerness to have and to appear.

The Church learns gratitude from the Virgin Mary. And she also learns *hope*. One would think that God chose her, Mary of Nazareth, because in her heart He saw His own hope reflected. That which He Himself had infused into her with His Spirit. Mary has always been filled with love, filled with grace, and is therefore also filled with trust and hope.

That of Mary and the Church is not optimism, it is something else: it is faith in God who is faithful to His promises (cf. *Lk* 1:55); and this faith takes the form of hope in the dimension of time, we could say “on the move”. The Christian, like Mary, is a *pilgrim of hope*. And it is precisely this that will be the theme of the Jubilee of 2025: “Pilgrims of hope”.

Dear brothers and sisters, we might ask ourselves: is Rome preparing to become the “city of hope” in the Holy Year? We all know that the organization of Jubilee has been underway for some time. But we are well aware that, from the perspective we assume here, it is not principally about this; rather, it is a question of the witness of the ecclesial and civil community, a witness that, more than the events, consists in the style of life, the ethical and spiritual quality of coexistence. And so the question one might ask is this: are we working, each person in his or her own sphere, so that the city may become a sign of hope for those who live there and those who visit?

An example. Entering Saint Peter’s Square and seeing that, in the embrace of the Colonnade, people of every nationality, every culture and religion, move freely and calmly, is an experience that instils hope; but it is important that it be confirmed by a good reception in the visit to the Basilica, as well as in the information services. Another example: the charm of the historic centre of Rome is perennial and universal, but it must also be possible for the elderly or those with motor disability to be able to enjoy it; and the “great beauty” needs to correspond to simple decorum and the normal functionality of places and situations in ordinary, everyday life. Because a city that is more livable for its citizens is also more welcoming for everyone.

Dear brothers and sisters, a pilgrimage, especially if it is demanding, requires good preparation. Therefore, the coming year, which precedes the Jubilee, is devoted to prayer. An entire year devoted to prayer. And what better teacher could we have than our Holy Mother? Let us place ourselves in her school: let us learn from her how to live every day, every moment, every occupation with the inner gaze turned towards Jesus. Joys and sufferings, satisfactions and problems. All in the presence of and with the grace of Jesus, the Lord. All with gratitude and hope.
