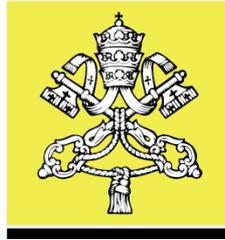


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Francis thanks delegations from Malta and Trentino for the St. Peter's Square Nativity display and Christmas tree

This morning in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father received in audience the delegations from Malta and the Italian region of Trentino, who have donated this year's Nativity display and Christmas tree in St. Peter's Square which, as Pope Francis said, will be contemplated by pilgrims from all over the world during Advent and the Christmas festivities.

The Pope thanked the bishops and government of Malta, who donated and installed the Nativity display, the "Foreste del Lagorai" Association which provided the large spruce for the Square and the other trees located around the Vatican, and representatives of the archdiocese and province of Trento, with the municipal authorities of the lower Valsugana area. "A special thought goes to the children who decorated the tree, with the support of the "Lene Thun" Foundation, which organises therapeutic courses in ceramics in various hospitals. The coloured spheres you have created depict the values of life, love and peace that the Nativity of Christ offers us every year".

The nativity display in St. Peter's Square is the work of the artist Manwel Grech of Gozo, Malta, and reproduces the Maltese landscape complete with the traditional cross of Malta and the "luzzu", a typical Maltese watercraft, "which also recalls the sad and tragic situation of migrants on boats headed for Italy. In the painful experience of these brothers and sisters, we see that of the child Jesus, who at the moment of His birth does not have a place to stay, and is born in a stable in Bethlehem, and was then taken to Egypt to flee the threat of Herod. Those who visit this Nativity display will be invited to rediscover its symbolic value, which is a message of fraternity, sharing, welcome and solidarity. Also the Nativities displayed in churches, homes and in many public places are an invitation to make space in our lives and in society for God, hidden in the face of so many people who are in conditions of discomfort, poverty and hardship".

The Christmas tree next to the Nativity display comes from the forests of Scurelle, at the foot of the Lagorai mountain range, a place of great natural beauty, with flowers, plants and crystal clear streams bordered by paths. "The beauty of this panorama is an invitation to contemplate the creator, and to respect nature, the work of His hands", observed Francis. "We are all called to draw close to creation with contemplative wonder".

The Nativity display and the tree therefore form a message of hope and of love, and help to create a Christmas atmosphere to help us to “live with faith the mystery of the Birth of the Redeemer, who came to earth with simplicity and meekness. Let us allow ourselves to be attracted, in the spirit of children, before the Nativity, as there one understands the goodness of God and contemplates His mercy, which becomes human flesh so as to soften our gaze”.
