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

At 5 p.m. today, in the Vatican Basilica, the Holy Father Francis presided at first Vespers of the Solemnity of Mary, Most Holy Mother of God, followed by the exposition of the Most Holy Sacrament, and the singing of the traditional *Te Deum* hymn of thanksgiving to conclude the civil year, and the Eucharistic blessing.

The following is the full text of the homily pronounced by the Holy Father during the celebration of Vespers:

“When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5).

These words of St. Paul are powerful. In a brief and concise way, they introduce God’s plan for us: He wants us to live as His sons and daughters. The whole of salvation history echoes in these words. He Who was not subject to the law chose, out of love, to set aside every privilege and to appear in the most unexpected place in order to free us who were under the law. What is so surprising is that God accomplishes this through the smallness and vulnerability of a newborn child. He decides personally to draw near to us and in His flesh to embrace our flesh, in His weakness to embrace our weakness, in His littleness to envelop our littleness. In Christ, God did not put on a human mask; instead He became man and shared completely in our human condition. Far from remaining an idea or an abstract essence, He wanted to be close to all those who felt lost, demeaned, hurt, discouraged, inconsolable and frightened. Close to all those who in their bodies carry the burden of separation and loneliness, so that sin, shame, hurt, despair and exclusion would not have the final word in the lives of his sons and daughters.

The manger invites us to make this divine “logic” our own. It is not a logic centred on privilege, exemptions or favours but one of encounter and closeness. The manger invites us to break with the logic of exceptions for some and exclusion for others. God Himself comes to shatter the chains of privilege that always cause exclusion, in order to introduce the caress of compassion that brings inclusion, that makes the dignity of each person shine forth, the dignity for which he or she was created. A child in swaddling clothes shows us the power

of God Who approaches us as a gift, an offering, a leaven and opportunity for creating a culture of encounter.

We cannot allow ourselves to be naïve. We know that we are tempted in various ways to adopt the logic of privilege that separates, excludes and closes us off, while separating, excluding and closing off the dreams and lives of so many of our brothers and sisters.

Today, before the little Child Jesus, we should acknowledge that we need the Lord to enlighten us, because all too often we end up being narrow-minded or prisoners of all-or-nothing attitude that would force others to conform to our own ideas. We need this light, which helps us learn from our mistakes and failed attempts in order to improve and surpass ourselves; this light born of the humble and courageous awareness of those who find the strength, time and time again, to rise up and start anew.

As another year draws to an end, let us pause before the manger and express our gratitude to God for all the signs of His generosity in our life and our history, seen in countless ways through the witness of those people who quietly took a risk. A gratitude that is no sterile nostalgia or empty recollection of an idealized and disembodied past, but a living memory, one that helps to generate personal and communal creativity because we know that God is with us. God is with us.

Let us pause before the manger to contemplate how God has been present throughout this year and to remind ourselves that every age, every moment is the bearer of graces and blessings. The manger challenges us not to give up on anything or anyone. To look upon the manger means to find the strength to take our place in history without complaining or being resentful, without closing in on ourselves or seeking a means of escape, looking for shortcuts in our own interest. Looking at the manger means recognizing that the times ahead call for bold and hope-filled initiatives, as well as the renunciation of vain self-promotion and endless concern with appearances.

Looking at the manger means seeing how God gets involved by involving us, making us part of His work, inviting us to welcome the future courageously and decisively.

Looking at the manger, we see Joseph and Mary, their young faces full of hopes and aspirations, full of questions. Young faces that look to the future conscious of the difficult task of helping the God-Child to grow. We cannot speak of the future without reflecting on these young faces and accepting the responsibility we have for our young; more than a responsibility, the right word would be debt, yes, the debt we owe them. To speak of a year's end is to feel the need to reflect on how concerned we are about the place of young people in our society.

We have created a culture that idolizes youth and seeks to make it eternal. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, we have condemned our young people to have no place in society, because we have slowly pushed them to the margins of public life, forcing them to migrate or to beg for jobs that no longer exist or fail to promise them a future. We have preferred speculation over dignified and genuine work that can allow young people to take active part in the life of society. We expect and demand that they be a leaven for the future, but we discriminate against them and "condemn" them to knock on doors that for the most part remain closed.

We are asked to be something other than the innkeeper in Bethlehem who told the young couple: there is no room here. There was no room for life, there was no room for the future. Each of us is asked to take some responsibility, however small, for helping our young people to find, here in their land, in their own country, real possibilities for building a future. Let us not be deprived of the strength of their hands, their minds, and their ability to prophesy the dreams of their ancestors (cf. Jl 2:28). If we wish to secure a future worthy of them, we should do so by staking it on true inclusion: one that provides work that is worthy, free, creative, participatory and solidary (cf. Address at the Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize, 6 May 2016).

Looking at the manger challenges us to help our young people not to become disillusioned by our own immaturity, and to spur them on so that they can be capable of dreaming and fighting for their dreams, capable of growing and becoming fathers and mothers of our people.

As we come to the end of this year, we do well to contemplate the God-Child! Doing so invites us to return to the sources and roots of our faith. In Jesus, faith becomes hope; it becomes a leaven and a blessing. "With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, Christ makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 3).
