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

At 17.00 this afternoon, at the Altar of the Cathedra of the Vatican Basilica, His Eminence Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals, presided at the first Vespers of the Solemnity of Mary Most Holy, the Mother of God, followed by the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the traditional hymn of the “Te Deum” at the conclusion of the civil year, and the Eucharistic Blessing.

The following is the homily prepared by the Holy Father for the celebration of First Vespers and “Te Deum”, read by Cardinal Re:

Homily

I will read the text that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, had prepared for this circumstance.

This evening’s celebration always has a two-fold aspect: liturgically, we enter into the solemn Feast of Mary Most Holy, the Mother of God; and at the same time, we conclude the solar year with the great hymn of praise.

Tomorrow we will have the opportunity to reflect together on the first aspect. This evening, we create the space for giving thanks for the year that is drawing to a close.

“We praise you, O God: We acclaim you as Lord.” This may seem to be a forced, almost jarring form of thanking God at the end of a year like this, marked by the pandemic. We think of the families who have lost one or more members, of those who are ill, of those who have suffered alone, of those who have lost their jobs...

Sometimes someone asks: what sense does a tragedy such as this have? We do not need to hastily respond to this question. To our most anguished “whys”, not even God responds by having recourse to “higher reason”. God’s response takes the path of the Incarnation, as the Antiphon for the Magnificat will sing in a moment: “In

his great love for us, God sent his Son in the likeness of our sinful nature”.

A God who would sacrifice human beings for his grand design, even the best possible, is certainly not the God that Jesus Christ revealed to us. God is Father, the “eternal Father”, and if his Son became man it is because of the immense compassion of the Father’s heart. God is a shepherd, and what shepherd would give up even a single sheep for lost, thinking that he at least still has many others? No, this cynical and ruthless god does not exist. This is not the God we “praise” and “acclaim as Lord”.

When the Good Samaritan met that poor, half-dead man on the side of the road, he did not give him a speech to explain to him the meaning of what had happened to him, perhaps even trying to convince him that in the end it was for his own good. The Samaritan, moved with compassion, bent over that stranger, treating him like a brother and cared for him, doing everything in his power (see *Lk 10:25-37*).

Yes, perhaps here we can find the “meaning” of this tragedy, of this pandemic, as well as other scourges that afflict humanity: the triggering compassion in us and of prompting attitudes and gestures of closeness, of care, of solidarity.

This is what has happened and is happening even in Rome in these months. And it is above all for this that we give thanks to God this evening: for the good things that have taken place in our cities during the lockdown and, in general, during the pandemic which, unfortunately, is not over yet.

There are many people who, without making noise, have tried to make the weight of this trial more bearable. With their daily dedication, inspired by love for their neighbour, they have made the words of the Te Deum real: “Day by day we praise you: We acclaim you now and to all eternity”. For the blessing and praise that the Lord loves the most is love of neighbour.

The healthcare workers – doctors, nurses, volunteers – found themselves on the front lines, and so they were always in our prayers and deserve our gratitude, as well as many priests and men and women religious. But this evening, our thanks go to all those who strive every day in the best way possible to carry on their service to their own families and the common good. We think especially of school administrators and teachers who carry out an essential role in the life of society and who must face a very complex situation. We gratefully think of public administrators as well who know how to value all of the resources present in their cities and territories, who are detached from their own private interests as well as those of their parties, who truly seek everyone’s good, beginning with the most disadvantaged.

All of this cannot happen without the grace, without the mercy of God. In difficult moments – we know this by experience – we are inclined to defend ourselves – this is natural – to protect ourselves and our dear ones, to safeguard our own interests... How is it then that so many people, without any other reward than that of doing good, found the strength to be concerned about others? What drove them to give up something of themselves, their own comfort, their own time, their own good, in order to give to others? In the end, even if they themselves are not aware of it, what fortifies them is God’s strength which is more powerful than our selfishness. We praise him for this, because we believe and we know that all the good that is accomplished day after day on earth, in the end, comes from him. And looking toward the future that awaits us, we implore of him once again: “May your mercy always be with us, Lord, For we have hoped in you”. Our trust and our hope are in you.

