



The Holy See

TE DEUM AND FIRST VESPERS
OF THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Wednesday, 31 December 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The year that is ending and that which is approaching on the horizon are both under the blessed gaze of the Most Holy Mother of God. The artistic polychrome sculpture set here next to the altar, which portrays her on a throne with the Child giving his Blessing, also recalls her motherly presence. We are celebrating the First Vespers of this Marian Solemnity, in which there are numerous liturgical references to the mystery of the Virgin's divine motherhood.

"*O admirabile commercium!* O marvelous exchange!". Thus begins the Antiphon of the first Psalm, to then continue: "man's Creator has become man, born of a virgin". "By your miraculous birth of the Virgin you have fulfilled the Scriptures", proclaims the Antiphon of the Second Psalm, which is echoed by the words of the third Antiphon that introduce us to the canticle taken from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians: "Your blessed and fruitful virginity is like the bush, flaming yet unburned, which Moses saw on Sinai. Pray for us, Mother of God". Mary's divine motherhood is also highlighted in the brief Reading proclaimed shortly beforehand, which proposes anew the well-known verses of the Letter to the Galatians: "When the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman... so that we might our status as adopted sons" (Gal 4: 4-5). And again, in the traditional *Te Deum* that we will raise at the end of our celebration before the Most Holy Sacrament solemnly exposed for our adoration singing, "*Tu, ad liberandum suscepturus hominem, non horruisti Virginis uterum*", in English: "when you, O Christ, became man to set us free you did not spurn the Virgin's womb".

Thus everything this evening invites us to turn our gaze to the one who "received the Word of God

in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world", and for this very reason the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council recalls "is acknowledged and honored as being truly the Mother of God" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 53). Christ's Nativity, which we are commemorating in these days, is entirely suffused with the light of Mary and, while we pause at the manger to contemplate the Child, our gaze cannot fail to turn in gratitude also to his Mother, who with her "yes" made possible the gift of Redemption. This is why the Christmas Season brings with it a profoundly Marian connotation; the birth of Jesus as God and man and Mary's divine motherhood are inseparable realities; the mystery of Mary and the mystery of the Only-Begotten Son of God who was made man form a single mystery, in which the one helps to better understand the other.

Mary Mother of God *Theotokos, Dei Genetrix*. Since ancient times Our Lady has been honoured with this title. However, for many centuries in the West there was no feast specifically dedicated to the divine Motherhood of Mary. It was introduced into the Latin Church by Pope Pius XI in 1931 on the occasion of the 15th centenary of the Council of Ephesus, and he chose to establish it on 11 October. On that date, in 1962, the Second Vatican Council was inaugurated. It was then the Servant of God Paul VI who restored an ancient tradition in 1969, fixing this Solemnity on 1 January. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis cultus* of 2 February 1974, he explained the reason for his decision and its connection with the World Day of Peace. "In the revised ordering of the Christmas period it seems to us that the attention of all should be directed towards the restored Solemnity of Mary the holy Mother of God," Paul VI wrote. "This celebration... is meant to commemorate the part played by Mary in this mystery of salvation. It is meant also to exalt the singular dignity which this mystery brings to the 'holy Mother'.... It is likewise a fitting occasion for renewing adoration to the newborn Prince of Peace, for listening once more to the glad tidings of the angels (cf. Lk 2: 14), and for imploring from God, through the Queen of Peace, the supreme gift of peace" (n. 5).

This evening, let us place in the hands of the heavenly Mother of God our choral hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord for the gifts he has generously granted us during the past 12 months. The first sentiment which spontaneously rises in our hearts this evening is precisely that of praise and thanksgiving to the One who gave us time, a precious opportunity to do good; let us combine with it our request for forgiveness for perhaps not always having spent it usefully. I am glad to share this thanksgiving with you, dear brothers and sisters who represent the whole of our diocesan community to which I address my cordial greeting, extending it to all the inhabitants of Rome. I extend a particular greeting to the Cardinal Vicar and to the Mayor, both of whom have begun their different missions this year one spiritual and religious, the other civil and administrative at the service of this city of ours. I extend my greeting to the Auxiliary Bishops, priests, consecrated people and the very many lay faithful who have gathered here, as well as to the authorities present. By coming into the world, the eternal Word of the Father revealed to us God's closeness and the ultimate truth about man and his eternal destiny; he came to stay with us to be our irreplaceable support, especially in the inevitable daily difficulties. And this evening the Virgin herself reminds us of what a great gift Jesus gave us with his Birth, of what a precious "treasure"

his Incarnation constitutes for us. In his Nativity Jesus comes to offer us his Word as a lamp to guide our steps; he comes to offer us himself and we must always affirm him as our unfailing hope in our daily life, aware that "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22).

Christ's presence is a gift that we must be able to share with everyone. It is for this purpose that the diocesan community is making an effort to form pastoral workers, so as to equip them to respond to the challenges modern culture poses to the Christian faith. The presence of numerous highly qualified academic institutions in Rome and the many initiatives promoted by the parishes enable us to look confidently to the future of Christianity in this city. As you well know, encountering Christ renews our personal life and helps us to contribute to building a just and fraternal society. This is why we as believers can also make a great contribution to overcoming the current educational emergency. Thus, for a profound evangelization and a courageous human promotion that can communicate the riches that derive from the encounter with Christ to as many people as possible, an increase in synergy among families, school and parishes is more important than ever. For this I encourage each member of our diocese to continue on the journey they have undertaken, together carrying out the programme for the current pastoral year which aims precisely to "educate to hope through prayer, action and suffering".

In our times, marked by uncertainty and concern for the future, it is necessary to experience the living presence of Christ. It is Mary, Star of Hope who leads us to him. It is she, with her maternal love, who can guide young people especially who bear in their hearts an irrepressible question about the meaning of human existence to Jesus. I know that various groups of parents, meeting in order to deepen their vocation, are seeking new ways to help their children respond to the big existential questions. I cordially urge them, together with the whole Christian community, to bear witness to the new generations of the joy that stems from encountering Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem and did not come to take something from us but rather to give us everything.

On Christmas night I had a special thought for children; instead, this evening it is young people above all on whom I wish to focus my attention. Dear young people, responsible for the future of this our city, do not be afraid of the apostolic task that the Lord is entrusting to you. Do not hesitate to choose a lifestyle that does not follow the current hedonistic mindset. The Holy Spirit assures you of the strength you need to witness to the joy of faith and the beauty of being Christian. The growing need for evangelization requires many labourers in the Lord's vineyard; do not hesitate to respond to him promptly if he calls you. Society needs citizens who are not concerned solely with their own interests because, as I recalled on Christmas Day, "If people look only to their own interests, our world will certainly fall apart".

Dear brothers and sisters, this year is ending with an awareness of the spreading social and financial crisis that now involves the whole world; a crisis that asks for greater moderation and solidarity from all, so that they may go to the aid especially of the individuals and families who are

in the most serious difficulty. The Christian community is already making efforts toward this and I know that the diocesan *Caritas* and other relief agencies are doing their utmost. Nonetheless, everyone's collaboration is necessary, for no one can think of building his own happiness alone. Although many clouds are gathering on the horizon of our future, we must not be afraid. Our great hope as believers is eternal life in communion with Christ and the whole family of God. This great hope gives us the strength to face and to overcome the difficulties of life in this world. This evening the motherly presence of Mary assures us that God never abandons us if we entrust ourselves to him and follow his teachings. Therefore, while we take our leave of 2008 and prepare to welcome 2009, let us present to Mary our expectations and hopes, as well as our fears and the difficulties that dwell in our hearts, with filial affection and trust. She, the Virgin Mother, offers us the Child who lies in the manger as our sure hope. Full of trust, we shall then be able to sing at the end of the *Te Deum*: "*In te, Domine, speravi: non confundar in aeternum* - In you, Lord, is our hope: and we shall never hope in vain". Yes, Lord, in you we hope, today and for ever; you are our hope. Amen!

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