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

At 17.00 today, in the Vatican Basilica, the Holy Father Francis presided over the first Vespers of the Solemnity of Mary Most Holy, Mother of God, followed by the exposition of the Holy Sacrament, the traditional “Te Deum” hymn at the end of the civil year, and the Eucharistic blessing. 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

“Born of a woman” (*Gal 4:4*).

When, in the fullness of time, God became man, he did not come swooping down into the world from heaven on high. He was born of Mary. He was not born *to* a woman but *of* a woman. This is essentially different – it means that God wanted to take on flesh from her. He did not use her, but asked for her “yes”, for her consent. And so, with her began the slow journey of the gestation of a humanity free from sin and filled with grace and truth, filled with love and faithfulness. A beautiful, good and true humanity, made in the image and likeness of God, but at the same time, woven with our flesh offered by Mary...never without her...always with her consent...in freedom, gratuitously, respectfully, in love.

And this is *the way* God chose to enter into the world and to enter into history. This is *the way*. And this way is essential, as essential as the very fact that he came. The divine motherhood of Mary – virginal motherhood, fruitful virginity – is the way that reveals God’s utmost respect for our freedom. He who created us without us did not want to save us without us (cf. S. Agostino, *Sermon CLXIX*, 13).

The way he chose to come to save us is the way on which he also invites us to follow him so as to continue to weave humanity – new, free, reconciled – together with him. This is the word: reconciled humanity. It is a style, a

way of relating to us, from which derives the multiplicity of human virtues of good and dignified living together. One of these virtues is *kindness*, as a way of life that fosters fraternity and social friendship (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 222-224).

And speaking of kindness, at this moment, my thought naturally goes to dear Pope emeritus Benedict XVI who left us this morning. We are moved as we recall him as such a noble person, so kind. And we feel such gratitude in our hearts: gratitude to God for having given him to the Church and to the world; gratitude to him for all the good he accomplished, and above all, for his witness of faith and prayer, especially in these last years of his recollected life. Only God knows the value and the power of his intercession, of the sacrifices he offered for the good of the Church.

And this evening, I would like to repropose kindness also as a *civic virtue*, thinking in particular of our diocese of Rome.

Kindness is an important aspect of the culture of dialogue, and dialogue is indispensable to live in peace, to live as brothers and sisters, who do not always agree – this is normal – but who nevertheless speak to each other, listen to each other and try to understand each other and to move toward one another. We only need to think of what the “world would be like without the patient dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together. Unlike disagreement and conflict, persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live better” (*ibid.*, 198). Kindness, then, is a part of dialogue. It is not only an issue of “good manners”; it is not a question of “etiquette”, of courteous behaviour.... No. This is not what we mean when speaking of kindness. Instead, it is a virtue to be retrieved and practiced every day in order to go against the tide and to humanize our societies.

The *harm of consumeristic individualism* is before everyone’s eyes. And the most serious damage is that others, the people who surround us, are perceived as obstacles to our tranquillity, to our well-being. Others “inconvenience” us, “disturb” us, rob us of the time and resources to do as we please. Our individualistic and consumeristic society tend to be aggressive, since others are competitors with whom to compete (cf. *ibid.*, 222). And yet, within these very societies of ours, and even in the most difficult situations we face, there are *individuals who demonstrate how it is possible to “cultivate kindness”* and thus, by their style of life, they “become stars shining in the midst of darkness” (*ibid.*).

Saint Paul, in the same Letter to the Galatians from which the Reading for this liturgy is taken, speaks of the fruit of the Holy Spirit among which one is mentioned using the Greek word *chrestotes* (cf. 5:22). This is the one that we can understand as “kindness”: a benevolent attitude that sustains and comforts others and avoids any form of roughness and harshness. It is a way of treating one’s neighbour taking care not to be hurtful through words or actions; trying to lighten others’ burdens, to encourage, to comfort, to console, without ever humiliating, mortifying or despising (cf. *Fratelli tutti*, 223).

Kindness is an *antidote against several pathologies of our societies*: an antidote against cruelty, which can unfortunately creep in like poison seeps into the heart, intoxicating relationships; an antidote against anxiety and distracted frenzy that makes us focus on ourselves, closing others off (cf. *ibid.*, 224). These “illnesses” of our everyday lives make us aggressive, make us incapable of asking “may I”, or even saying “sorry”, or of simply saying “thank you”. These three extremely human words for living together: may I, sorry, thank you. With these three words, we move forward in peace, in human friendship. They are the words of kindness: may I, sorry, thank you. It will do us good to think about whether we use them often in our lives: may I, sorry, thank you. And so, when we meet a kind person on the street, or in a store, or in the office, we are amazed, it seems to be a small miracle because, unfortunately, kindness is no longer common. But, thanks be to God, there are still kind people who know how to put their own concerns aside to pay attention to others, to offer the gift of a smile, to give an encouraging word, to listen to someone who needs to confide something, and to vent (cf. *ibid.*).

Dear brothers and sisters, I think that retrieving kindness as a personal and civic virtue might help a great deal to improve life within families, communities and cities. For this reason, as we look to the new year as the City of Rome, my wish for all of us who live here is that we might grow in this virtue: kindness. Experience teaches that

kindness, if it becomes a style of life, can create a healthy living together, it can humanize social relationships, diffusing aggression and indifference (cf. *ibid.*).

Let us look on the icon of the Virgin Mary. Today and tomorrow, here in Saint Peter's Basilica, we can venerate her through the image of Our Lady of Carmine of Avigliano, near Potenza. Let us not take her divine motherhood for granted! Let us allow ourselves to be amazed by God's choice who could have come into the world in a thousand ways manifesting his power and, instead, willed to be conceived in full freedom in Mary's womb, wanted to be formed for nine months like every baby and, in the end, to be born of her, to be born of a woman. Let us not pass over this quickly. Let us pause to contemplate and meditate because there is an essential characteristic of the mystery of salvation here. And let us try to learn God's "method", his infinite respect, his "kindness" so to speak, because the way for a more human world is found in the divine motherhood of the Virgin.
