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Audience with the figure performers and operators of the living Nativity scene in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major

This morning, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the figure performers and operators of the living Nativity scene in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major.

The following is the Pope's greeting to those present during the audience:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

You have come already wearing the costumes for the living Nativity scene this afternoon at Saint Mary Major. Thank you! I thank the Cardinal [S. Ryłko, Archpriest of the Basilica] and I thank Monsignor Makrickas, who involved so many of you in this beautiful initiative.

The Basilica of Saint Mary Major preserves the relic of Jesus' crib, and therefore it has a very special connection to Bethlehem and the crib. In fact, it also houses the sculptural group by Arnolfo di Cambio, commissioned by Pope Nicholas IV, considered the first nativity scene in the history of art. That is why I want to share just two thoughts with you, to accompany you throughout the day. Two thoughts.

First of all, I think of Saint Francis. As we know, he invented the living Nativity, in Greccio, exactly eight hundred years ago. But it is important to remember *why* he invented it, to understand its meaning, so as not to reduce it to a mere folkloric fact. Francis wanted to represent *in life* the birth of Jesus to inspire, in friars and in the people, emotion and tenderness towards the mystery of God born of Mary in a stable and laid in a manger. He wanted to give substance to the representation: not a painting, not statues, but people in flesh and blood, in order to highlight the reality of the incarnation. So, the first thought I leave to you is this: the purpose of the living Nativity scene is to reawaken wonder in the heart, before the mystery of God who became a child.

The second thought is for our brothers and sisters of Bethlehem, Bethlehem today. And naturally this extends to all the inhabitants of the land where Jesus was born, lived, died and rose again. We know the situation, caused by the war, the consequence of a conflict that has lasted for decades. So your performance must be lived in solidarity with these brothers and sisters who are suffering a great deal. For them, it promises to be a Christmas of suffering, of mourning, without pilgrims, without celebrations. We do not want to leave them alone. Let us be close to them with prayer, with concrete aid and also with your living Nativity, which reminds everyone of how the suffering of Bethlehem is an open wound for the Middle East and for the entire world. This Christmas let us think, let us think about the Holy Land.

Dear brothers and sisters, I hope you will live this day with faith and joy; may it bear witness to the Gospel! I bless all of you and your loved ones from my heart. And do not forget to pray for me. Happy Christmas!
