



The Holy See

FIRST VESPERS ON THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD AND TE DEUM IN THANKSGIVING FOR THE PAST YEAR

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Vatican Basilica

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“When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal 4:4).

The Son sent by the Father pitched his tent in Bethlehem of Ephrathah, that is “little to be among the clans of Judah” (Mic 5:2). He lived in Nazareth, a city never mentioned in the Scriptures if not to say: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46), and died rejected by the big city, by Jerusalem, crucified outside its walls. God’s decision is clear: he chooses a small and despised city to reveal his love and when he reaches Jerusalem he joins the sinners and the discarded. None of the city’s inhabitants realizes that the Son of God made man is walking along their streets, probably not even his disciples who will only fully understand the mystery within Jesus, at the Resurrection.

The words and signs of salvation that Jesus expresses in the city arouse wonder and temporary enthusiasm, but they are not understood in their full meaning. Shortly thereafter, they will no longer be remembered when the Roman Governor asks: “Do you want Jesus or Barabbas to be freed?”. Jesus was crucified outside the city, up high on Golgotha, condemned by the gaze of all the inhabitants and mocked by their sarcastic comments. But from there, from the Cross, the new tree of life, the power of God would attract all to him. And also the Mother of God who, at the foot of the Cross is Our Lady of Sorrows, is about to offer her motherhood to all mankind. The Mother of God is the Mother of the Church and her maternal tenderness reaches all men and women.

God has pitched his tent in cities ... and he has never moved from there! His presence in cities, even in our city of Rome, “must not be contrived but found, uncovered” (Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 71). It is we who should ask God for the grace of new eyes capable of a “contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares” (*ibid.*, n. 71). The prophets in the Scriptures warn against the temptation to link God’s presence only to the Temple (Jer 7:4): He lives in the midst of his people, walks with them and lives their life. His fidelity is concrete. It is closeness to his children’s daily life. Indeed when God wants to do new things through his Son, he does not start from the Temple but rather from the womb of a small, poor woman of his people. God’s choice is extraordinary! He does not change history through powerful men from civil and religious institutions, but rather starts with the women on the Empire’s peripheries like Mary and from their sterile wombs like Elizabeth’s.

In Psalm 147[146]:15 which we have just prayed, the Psalmist invites Jerusalem to glorify God because “he sends forth his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly”. By way of his Spirit which utters his Word to every human heart, God blesses his children and encourages them to work for peace in the city. Tonight I would like that our gaze over the city of Rome may grasp things from God’s point of view. The Lord rejoices at seeing how many achievements of good take place every day, how much effort and dedication is put into fostering fraternity. Rome is not only a complicated city, with many problems and inequalities, corruption and social tensions. Rome is a city in which God sends forth his Word which through the Spirit nestles in the heart of its dwellers and stirs them to believe, to have hope despite everything, to love, fighting for the good of all.

I am thinking of many brave people, believers and non-believers whom I have met over these years and who represent “the beating heart” of Rome. Truly God has never stopped changing history and the face of our city through the least and the poor people that live in it. He chooses them, inspires them, motivates them to take action, makes them supportive, spurs them to establish networks, create virtuous bonds, to build bridges, not walls. It is precisely through these thousands of rivulets of the living water of the Spirit that the Word of God fruitifies the city and, from barren, turns it into a “joyous mother of children: (Ps 113 [112]:9). And what does the Lord ask of the Church? He entrusts to us his Word and spurs us to throw ourselves into the throng, to involve ourselves in encounters and relationships with the inhabitants of the city so that his word may run swiftly. We are called to encounter the others and to listen to their life stories, their cry for help. Listening is already an act of love! Having time for others, to enter into dialogue, recognizing with a contemplative gaze the presence and action of God in their lives, to bear witness with actions more than with words to the new life of the Gospel is truly a service of love that changes reality. Indeed, thus doing, a new air circulates in our city and our church, a willingness to take up the journey again, to overcome the old mindset of opposition and fences in order to cooperate in building a more just and fraternal city together.

We must not be afraid or feel inadequate for this most important mission. Let us remember: God does not choose us because of our “goodness” but precisely because we are and we feel small.

Let us thank him for his grace which has sustained us this year and let us joyfully lift a hymn of praise to him.

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