

## GOSPEL

*Luke 2:16–21*

The shepherds hurried away to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception.

## HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS *1 January 2014*

In the first reading we find the ancient prayer of blessing which God gave to Moses to hand on to Aaron and his sons: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (*Num* 6:24-25). There is no more meaningful time than the beginning of a new year to hear these words of blessing: they will accompany our journey through the year opening up before us. They are words of strength, courage and hope. Not an illusory hope, based on frail human promises, or a naïve hope which presumes that the future will be better simply because it is the future. Rather, it is a hope that has its foundation precisely in God’s blessing, a blessing which contains the greatest message of good wishes there can be; and this is the message which the Church brings to each of us, filled with the Lord’s loving care and providential help.

The message of hope contained in this blessing was fully realized in a woman, Mary, who was destined to become the Mother of God, and it was fulfilled in her before all creatures.

The Mother of God. This is the first and most important title of Our Lady. It refers to a quality, a role which the faith of the Christian people, in its tender and genuine devotion to our heavenly Mother, has understood from the beginning.

We recall that great moment in the history of the ancient Church, the Council of Ephesus, in which

the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary was authoritatively defined. The truth of her divine maternity found an echo in Rome where, a little later, the Basilica of Saint Mary Major was built, the first Marian shrine in Rome and in the entire West, in which the image of the Mother of God – the *Theotokos* – is venerated under the title of *Salus Populi Romani*. It is said that the residents of Ephesus used to gather at the gates of the basilica where the bishops were meeting and shout, “Mother of God!”. The faithful, by asking them to officially define this title of Our Lady, showed that they acknowledged her divine motherhood. Theirs was the spontaneous and sincere reaction of children who know their Mother well, for they love her with immense tenderness. But it is more: it is the *sensus fidei* of the holy People of God which, in its unity, never errs.

Mary has always been present in the hearts, the piety and above all the pilgrimage of faith of the Christian people. “The Church journeys through time... and on this journey she proceeds along the path already trodden by the Virgin Mary” (*Redemptoris Mater*, 2). Our journey of faith is the same as that of Mary, and so we feel that she is particularly close to us. As far as faith, the hinge of the Christian life, is concerned, the Mother of God shared our condition. She had to take the same path as ourselves, a path which is sometimes difficult and obscure. She had to advance in the “pilgrimage of faith” (*Lumen gentium*, 58).

Our pilgrimage of faith has been inseparably linked to Mary ever since Jesus, dying on the Cross, gave her to us as our Mother, saying: “Behold your Mother!” (*Jn* 19:27). These words serve as a testament, bequeathing to the world a Mother. From that moment on, the Mother of God also became our Mother! When the faith of the disciples was most tested by difficulties and uncertainties, Jesus entrusted them to Mary, who was the first to believe, and whose faith would never fail. The “woman” became our Mother when she lost her divine Son. Her sorrowing heart was enlarged to make room for all men and women, all, whether good or bad, and she loves them as she loved Jesus. The woman who at the wedding at Cana in Galilee gave her faith-filled cooperation so that the wonders of

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God could be displayed in the world, at Calvary kept alive the flame of faith in the resurrection of her Son, and she communicates this with maternal affection to each and every person. Mary becomes in this way a source of hope and true joy!

The Mother of the Redeemer goes before us and continually strengthens us in faith, in our vocation and in our mission. By her example of humility and openness to God's will she helps us to transmit our faith in a joyful proclamation of the Gospel to all, without reservation. In this way our mission will be fruitful, because it is modeled on the motherhood of Mary. To her let us entrust our journey of faith,

the desires of our heart, our needs and the needs of the whole world, especially of those who hunger and thirst for justice and peace, and for God. Let us then together invoke her, and I invite you to invoke her three times, following the example of those brothers and sisters of Ephesus: Mother of God! Mother of God! Mother of God! Amen.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/Homily?



**Head:** How do you understand the teaching that Mary is both the Mother of God, but also is given to the Church, and to you, as our Mother?



**Heart:** What, like Mary, are some things that you treasure and ponder in your heart?



**Hands:** Mary is considered the model disciple of Jesus. What are some qualities of the life and witness of Mary that you feel called to embrace in your own journey of discipleship and faith?

## PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.