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Twenty Meters from the Pope

Fr. Santiago Quemada, who lives in Jerusalem, relates his experiences at the Pope's Mass in Bethlehem on May 13.

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We had to get up very early in order to pass through the check point; otherwise it would have been impossible to reach Bethlehem. We were also informed that at 4 a.m. vehicles parked along the main road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem would be towed away.

And so a little after 5:30 am we passed through the check point, with dozens of police in sight and many tow-trucks in service. We had no trouble reaching Bethlehem. After passing through check point Beit Jalla, we parked at the seminary and continued on foot to the square next to the Basilica, where the Mass would be celebrated.

Twenty meters from the Pope

We were among the first to arrive; metal detectors were still being set up. When I reached the section reserved for priests, only a few others were there and I was able to get a seat in the front row. I was only about twenty meters from where the Pope would be seated.

We began to be a bit concerned that more people and priests weren't arriving. It seems there was only one entrance, and it took a long time for everyone to pass through. Finally the

square was completed filled—something like 3,000 people. Probably more would be watching from the surrounding streets.

A festive atmosphere

It was different from yesterday's Mass in Jerusalem—much more festive, and with a distinctly local air. Christians from the Palestinian territories who had been unable to attend the previous Masses with the Pope were present, along with faithful from every Palestinian town—Ramallah, Nablus, Taybe.... A small group of Christians from Gaza, about 50, had been allowed to come. When the Pope signaled them out and spoke affectionately about Gaza, there was loud applause.

Before the ceremony began we were given caps and scarves with the papal colors. A little later the Palestinian Authority also provided

caps and scarves bearing the Palestinian flag.

The Holy Father's greeting

Before arriving for the Mass, the Pope had met with the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmud Abbas, assuring him that the Holy See supported the right of his people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland.

When the Holy Father arrived in Manger Square in the Popemobile he was greeted enthusiastically. It stopped in the middle, in front of the section with priests. We called out and applauded, and the Pope responded to everyone warmly. He left the Popemobile and walked to the vesting area.

The Pope's Homily

Before Mass began, as on the previous day, the Patriarch spoke at length about the difficult situation in

which the people are living, and asked for prayers for the Holy Father.

In his homily, the Pope responded to the plight of the people in very specific terms. He said he prayed that the embargo oppressing the Gaza Strip would soon be lifted, and appealed for greater freedom of movement for family members. But above all he offered strong spiritual encouragement and nourishment to the people, and they responded warmly.

After Mass, the Holy Father will have lunch with the bishops of the Holy Land and accompany them to pray at the Grotto of the Nativity. Then he will visit the Charity Hospital for Infants and a refugee camp near Bethlehem.

We have to continue praying a lot for the Pope's trip. If we find ourselves tired after these two days with him,

imagine how exhausting it must be for the Holy Father, at his age, to keep up with the scheduled events.

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