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"Mary's eyes reflect the beauty of God"

Homily of Pope Francis given on January 1 in Saint Peter's Basilica, for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

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“All who heard were amazed at what the shepherds told them” (*Lk* 2:18).

To be amazed: this is what is asked of us today, at the conclusion of the Octave of Christmas, as we continue to contemplate the Child born for us, lacking everything yet abounding in love. Amazement is what we should

feel at the beginning of each year, for life is a gift that constantly gives us a chance to make a new start, even from the most lowly of circumstances.

Today is also a day to be amazed by the Mother of God. God appears as a little child, held in the arms of a woman who feeds her Creator. The statue before our eyes depicts the Mother and Child so close as to appear as one. That is the mystery we celebrate today, which gives rise to boundless amazement: God has become one with humanity forever. God and man, always together, that is the good news of this new year. God is no distant lord, dwelling in splendid isolation above the heavens, but love incarnate, born like us of a mother, in order to be a brother to each of us, to be close to us: the God of closeness. He rests on the lap of his mother, who is also our mother, and from there he pours out upon

humanity a new tenderness. Thus we come to understand more fully God's love, which is both paternal and maternal, like that of a mother who never stops believing in her children and never abandons them. God-with-us, Emmanuel, loves us despite our mistakes, our sins, and the way we treat our world. God believes in mankind, because its first and preeminent member is his own Mother.

At the beginning of the year, let us implore from Mary the grace to be amazed at the God of surprises. Let us renew the amazement we felt when faith was first born in us. The Mother of God helps us: the Mother who gave birth to the Lord, now presents us, reborn, to the Lord. She is a mother who generates in her children the amazement of faith, because faith is an encounter, not a religion. Without amazement, life becomes dull and routine, and so it is

with faith. The Church too needs to renew her amazement at being the dwelling place of the living God, the Bride of the Lord, a Mother who gives birth to her children.

Otherwise, she risks turning into a beautiful museum of the past. A “Church museum.” Our Lady instead gives the Church the feel of a home, a home in which the God of newness dwells. Let us receive with amazement the mystery of the Mother of God, as the inhabitants of Ephesus did at the time of the Council. Like them, let us acclaim her “Holy Mother of God.” From her, *let us allow ourselves to be gazed upon, to be embraced, to be taken by the hand.*

Let us allow ourselves to be gazed upon. Especially in times of need, when we are entangled in life’s knots, we rightly lift our eyes *to* Our Lady, to Our Mother. Yet first, we should let ourselves be gazed upon

by Our Lady. When she gazes upon us, she does not see sinners but children. It is said that the eyes are the mirror of the soul; the eyes of Mary, *full of grace*, reflect the beauty of God, they show us a reflection of heaven. Jesus himself said that the eye is “the lamp of the body” (*Mt 6:22*): the eyes of Our Lady are able to bring light to every dark corner; everywhere they rekindle hope. As she gazes upon us, she says: “Take heart, dear children; here I am, your Mother!”

This maternal gaze, which instils confidence and trust, helps us to grow in faith. Faith is a bond with God that engages the whole person; to be preserved, it needs the Mother of God. Her maternal gaze helps us see ourselves as beloved children in God’s faithful people, and to love one another regardless of our individual limitations and approaches. Our Lady keeps us rooted in the Church,

where unity counts more than diversity; she encourages us to care for one another. Mary's gaze reminds us that faith demands a tenderness that can save us from becoming lukewarm. Tenderness: the Church of tenderness. Tenderness is a word that today many want to remove from the dictionary. When faith makes a place for the Mother of God, we never lose sight of the centre: the Lord, for Mary never points to herself but to Jesus; and our brothers and sisters, for Mary is mother.

The gaze of the Mother, and the gaze of every mother. A world that looks to the future without a mother's gaze is shortsighted. It may well increase its profits, but it will no longer see others as children. It will make money, but not for everyone. We will all dwell in the same house, but not as brothers and sisters. The human family is built upon mothers. A world in which maternal tenderness is

dismissed as mere sentiment may be rich materially, but poor where the future is concerned. Mother of God, teach us to see life as you do. Turn your gaze upon us, upon our misery, our poverty. *Turn to us thine eyes of mercy.*

Let us allow ourselves to be embraced. From Mary's gaze, we now turn to her heart, in which, as today's Gospel recounts, she "treasured all these things and pondered them" (*Lk* 2:19). Our Lady, in other words, took everything to heart; she embraced everything, events both good and bad. And she pondered all these things; she brought them before God. This was her secret. In the same way, she now takes to heart the life of each of us: she wants to embrace our every situation and to present it to God.

In today's fragmented world, where we risk losing our bearings, a

Mother's embrace is essential. How much dispersion and solitude there is all around us! The world is completely connected, yet seems increasingly disjointed. We need to entrust ourselves to our Mother. In the Scriptures, Our Lady embraces any number of concrete situations; she is present wherever she is needed. She visits her cousin Elizabeth; she comes to the aid of the newlyweds in Cana; she encourages the disciples in the Upper Room... Mary is a cure for solitude and dispersion. She is the Mother of consolation: she stands "with" those who are "alone." She knows that words are not enough to console; presence is needed, and she is present as a mother. Let us allow her to embrace our lives. In the *Salve Regina*, we call her "our life". This may seem exaggerated, for Christ himself is "life" (cf. *Jn* 14:6), yet Mary is so closely united to him, and so close to us, that we can do no better than to

put our hands in hers and to acknowledge her as “our life, our sweetness and our hope.”

And in the journey of life, *let us allow ourselves to be taken by the hand.*

Mothers take their children by the hand and lovingly introduce them to life. But how many children today wander off on their own and lose their way. Thinking they are strong, they get lost; thinking they are free, they become slaves. How many, forgetting a mother’s affection, live in anger with themselves and indifference to everything! How many, sad to say, react to everything and everyone with bitterness and malice! Life is such. Showing oneself “malicious” even seems at times to be a sign of strength. Yet it is nothing more than weakness. We need to learn from mothers that heroism is shown in self-giving, strength in compassion, wisdom in meekness.

God himself needed a Mother: how much more so do we! Jesus himself gave her to us, from the cross: “Behold your mother!” (Jn 19:27). He said this to the beloved disciple and to every disciple. Our Lady is not an optional accessory: she has to be welcomed into our life. She is the Queen of peace, who triumphs over evil and leads us along paths of goodness, who restores unity to her children, who teaches us compassion.

Mary, take us by the hand. Clinging to you, we will pass safely through the straits of history. Lead us by the hand to rediscover the bonds that unite us. Gather us beneath your mantle, in the tenderness of true love, where the human family is reborn: “*We fly to thy protection, O Holy Mother of God*”. Let us together pray these words to Our Lady: “*We fly to thy protection, O Holy Mother of God.*”

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