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General Audience

This morning's general audience took place at 9.00 in the Paul VI Hall, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian, the Holy Father focused on the birth of Jesus (Bible reading: *Lk 2: 10-12*).

After summarizing his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful in attendance. He then launched an appeal for solidarity towards refugees and migrants.

The general audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the apostolic blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, just a few days before Christmas, I would like to recall with you the event history cannot dispense with: the birth of Jesus.

To comply with the Emperor Cesar Augustus' decree that ordered them to go to their place of origin to be registered, Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. As soon as they arrived, they immediately sought lodging since the moment for Mary to give birth was imminent. Unfortunately, they did not find anything. So, Mary was forced to give birth in a stable (cf. *Lk. 2:1-7*).

Let's think: the Creator of the universe... He was not given a place to be born! Perhaps this was an anticipation of what the evangelist John would say: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (1:11); and what Jesus Himself would say: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (*Lk 9:58*).

It was an angel who announced the birth of Jesus, and he did so to some lowly shepherds. And it was a star that showed the Magi the way to Bethlehem (cf. *Mt* 2:1, 9.10). An angel is a messenger from God. The star reminds us that God created the light (*Gn* 1:3) and that the Baby would be “the light of the world”, as He would define himself (cf. *Jn* 8:12, 46), the “true light that enlightens every man” (*Jn* 1:9), that “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (v. 5).

The shepherds personify the poor of Israel, lowly people who interiorly live with the awareness of their own want. Precisely for this reason, they trust more than others in God. They were the first to see the Son of God made man, and this encounter changed them deeply. The Gospel notes that they returned “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (*Lk* 2:20).

The Magi are also around the newborn Jesus (cf. *Mt* 2:1-12). The Gospels do not tell us who the kings might have been, nor how many there were, nor what their names were. The only thing we know for certain is that they came from a distant country in the East (perhaps from Babylonia, or Arabia, or Persia of that time), they set out on a journey seeking the King of the Jews, whom they identified with God in their hearts because they said they wanted to adore him. The Magi represent the pagan peoples, in particular all those who have sought God down through the ages, and who set out on a journey to find Him. They also represent the rich and powerful, but only those who are not slaves to possessions, who are not “possessed” by the things they believe they possess.

The message of the Gospels is clear: the birth of Jesus is a universal event that concerns all of humanity.

Dear brothers and sisters, *humility is the only way* that leads us to God. At the same time, specifically because it leads us to Him, humility leads us also to the essentials of life, to its truest meaning, to the most trustworthy reason for why life is truly worth living.

Humility alone opens us up to the experience of truth, of authentic joy, of knowing what matters. Without humility we are “cut off”, we are cut off from understanding God and from understanding ourselves. Humility is needed to understand ourselves, all the more so to understand God. The Magi may have even been great according to the world’s logic, but they made themselves lowly, humble, and precisely because of this they succeeded in finding Jesus and recognising Him. They accepted the humility of seeking, of setting out on a journey, of asking, of taking a risk, of making a mistake.

Every person, in the depths of his or her heart, is called to seek God: we all have that restlessness. Our work is not to snuff out that restlessness, but to allow it to grow because it is that restlessness that seeks God; and, with His own grace, can find Him. We can make this prayer of Saint Anselm (1033-1109) our own: “Lord, teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you.” (*Proslogion*, 1).

Dear brothers and sisters, I would like to invite every man and woman to the stable of Bethlehem to adore the Son of God made man. May each one of us draw near to the creche in our own homes or in the church or in another place, and try to make an act of adoration, inside: “I believe you are God, that this baby is God. Please, grant me the grace of humility to be able to understand”.

In approaching and praying by the crib, I would like to put the *poor* in the front row, those whom – as Saint Paul VI used to exhort – “we must love because in a certain way they are the sacrament of Christ; in them – in the hungry, the thirsty, the exiles, the naked, the ill, prisoners – He wanted to be mystically identified. We must help them, suffer with them, and also follow them because poverty is the surest path to possess the Kingdom of God in its fullness” (*Homily*, 1 May 1969). For this reason, we must ask for the grace of humility: “Lord, that I might not be proud, that I might not be self-sufficient, that I might not believe that I am the centre of the universe. Make me humble. Grant me the grace of humility. And with this humility, may I find You”. It is the only way; without humility we will never find God: we will find ourselves. The reason is that the person who is not humble has no horizon in front of him or her. They only have a mirror in which to look at themselves. Let us ask the Lord to break this mirror so we can look beyond, to the horizon, where He is. But He needs to do this: grant us the

grace and the joy of humility to take this path.

Then, brothers and sisters, just like the star did with the Magi, I would like to accompany to Bethlehem all those who have no religious restlessness, who do not pose the question of God, or who may even fight against religion, all those who are improperly identified as *atheists*. I would like to repeat to them the message of the Second Vatican Council: “The Church holds that the recognition of God is in no way hostile to man’s dignity, since this dignity is rooted and perfected in God. [...] Above all the Church knows that her message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 21).

Let’s return home with the angel’s song: “Peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!” Let us always remember: “In this is love, not that we loved God that he loved us [...] he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10, 19), he has sought us. Let’s not forget this.

This is the reason for our joy: we are loved, we are sought for, the Lord seeks us to find us, to love us more. This is the reason for joy: knowing that we are loved without any merit, we are always loved first by God, with a love so concrete that He took on flesh and came to live in our midst., in that Baby that we see in the crib. This love has a name and a face: Jesus is the name and the face of love – this is the foundation of our joy.

Brothers and sisters, I wish you a Merry Christmas, a happy and holy Christmas. And I would like that – yes, there are well wishes, family reunions, this is always very beautiful – but may there also be the awareness that God comes “for me”. Let’s everyone say this: God comes for me. The awareness that to seek God, to find God, to accept God, humility is needed: to seek with humility the grace of breaking the mirror of vanity, of pride, of looking at ourselves. To look at Jesus, to look toward the horizon, to look at God who comes to us and who touches our hearts with that restlessness that brings us hope. Happy and holy Christmas!

Greeting in English

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, I invoke upon you and your families joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ. May God bless you!

Appeal of the Holy Father

During my visit to Cyprus and Greece, I was able to once again personally touch wounded humanity in refugees and migrants. I also noted how only some European countries are bearing most of the consequences of this migratory phenomenon in the Mediterranean area, while in reality, a shared responsibility is necessary from which no country can exempt itself. In particular, thanks to the generous openness of the Italian authorities, I was able to bring to Rome a group of people I met during my journey: some of them are here among us today. Welcome! As a Church, we will take care of them during the coming months. This is a small sign that I hope will serve as a stimulus for other European countries, so that they might allow the local ecclesial communities to take care of other brothers and sisters who are in urgent need of being relocated.

In fact, there are many local Churches, religious congregations and Catholic organizations who are ready to welcome and accompany them toward a fruitful integration. All that is needed is an open door!
