

# For New Year, pope urges help for refugees, respect for life

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis began the New Year praying the world would demonstrate a marked increase in solidarity and welcome for migrants and refugees.

“Let’s not extinguish the hope in their hearts; let’s not suffocate their hopes for peace,” the pope said Jan. 1 before reciting the Angelus with a crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square.

For the New Year’s celebration of World Peace Day and the feast of Mary, Mother of God, Pope Francis had chosen to focus on migrants and refugees and their yearning for peace.

“For this peace, which is the right of all, many of them are willing to risk their lives in a journey that, in most cases, is long and dangerous and to face trials and suffering,” the pope told an estimated 40,000 people gathered in the square around the Christmas tree and Nativity scene.

Pope Francis said it is important that everyone, including individuals, governments, schools, churches and church agencies, make a commitment to “ensuring refugees, migrants — everyone — a future of peace.”

Entrusting the needs of migrants and refugees to the maternal concern of Mary, the pope led the crowd in reciting a traditional Marian prayer: “Under thy protection we seek refuge, holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our needs, but from all dangers deliver us always, Virgin, Glorious and Blessed.”

Pope Francis had begun the day celebrating Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica for the Marian feast, which he said was a celebration of “a magnificent truth about God and about ourselves: From the moment that our Lord became incarnate in Mary, and for all time, he took on our humanity.”

“To call Mary the mother of God reminds us,” he said, that “God is close to

humanity, even as a child is close to the mother who bears him in her womb.”

God becoming human in the baby Jesus, the pope said, is an affirmation that human life “is precious and sacred to the Lord,” so “to serve human life is to serve God.”

“All life, from life in the mother’s womb to that of the elderly, the suffering and the sick, and to that of the troublesome and even repellent, is to be welcomed, loved and helped,” he said.

Pope Francis also drew people’s attention to the fact that in the Gospel stories of Jesus’ birth, Mary is silent. And the newborn Jesus, obviously, cannot speak.

“We need to remain silent as we gaze upon the crib,” he said. “Pondering the crib, we discover anew that we are loved; we savor the real meaning of life. As we look on in silence, we let Jesus speak to our heart.

“May his lowliness lay low our pride; his poverty challenge our pomp; his tender love touch our hardened hearts,” the pope prayed.

Celebrating evening prayer Dec. 31 and offering thanks to God for the year that was ending, Pope Francis gave a special acknowledgement to people — especially parents and teachers — who are “artisans of the common good,” working to help their families, neighbors and communities each day without fanfare.

But, he said, people also must acknowledge that God gave humanity the year 2017 “whole and sound,” yet “we human beings have in many ways wasted and wounded it with works of death, with lies and injustices. Wars are the flagrant sign of this backsliding and absurd pride. But so are all the small and great offenses against life, truth and solidarity, which cause multiple forms of human, social and environmental degradation.”

The pope also led the midday Angelus prayer Dec. 31, the feast of the Holy Family.

The Sunday Gospel reading recounted Mary and Joseph taking the baby Jesus to the temple “to certify that the child belongs to God and that they are the guardians of his life and not the owners,” the pope said.

Mary and Joseph experience the joy of seeing their son grow in wisdom, grace and strength, the pope said. "This is mission to which the family is called: to create the best conditions that will allow for the harmonious and full growth of children, so that they can live a life that is good, worthy of God and constructive for the world."

Growth and rebirth are possibilities open to every family, he said. "Whenever families, even those wounded and marked by frailty, failure and difficulty, return to the source of Christian experience, new paths and unimagined possibilities open up."

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