

PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50th
ANNIVERSARY
OF THE MEETING BETWEEN POPE PAUL VI AND PATRIARCH
ATHENAGORAS IN JERUSALEM
(24-26 MAY 2014)

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

*Manger Square (Bethlehem)
Sunday, 25 May 2014*

Video

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (*Lk 2:12*).

What a great grace it is to celebrate the Eucharist in the place where Jesus was born! I thank God and I thank all of you who have welcomed me on my pilgrimage: President Mahmoud Abbas and the other civil authorities; Patriarch Fouad Twal and the other bishops and ordinaries of the Holy Land, the priests, the good Franciscans, the consecrated persons and all those who labor to keep faith, hope and love alive in these lands; the faithful who have come from Gaza and Galilee, and the immigrants from Asia and Africa. Thank you for your welcome!

The Child Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is the *sign* given by God to those who awaited salvation, and he remains forever the sign of God's tenderness and presence in our world. The angel announces to the shepherds: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child...".

Today too, *children are a sign*. They are a sign of hope, a sign of life, but also a "*diagnostic*" sign, a marker indicating the health of families, society and the entire world. Wherever children are accepted, loved, cared for and protected, the family is healthy, society is more healthy and the world is more human. Here we can think of the work carried out by the Ephpheta Paul VI institute for hearing and speech impaired Palestinian children: it is a very real sign of God's goodness. It is a clear sign that

society is healthier.

To us, the men and women of the twenty-first century, God today also says: "This will be a sign for you", look to the child...

The Child of Bethlehem is frail, like all newborn children. He cannot speak and yet he is the Word made flesh who came to transform the hearts and lives of all men and women. This Child, like every other child, is vulnerable; he needs to be accepted and protected. Today too, children need to be welcomed and defended, from the moment of their conception.

Sadly, in this world, with all its highly developed technology, great numbers of children continue to live in inhuman situations, on the fringes of society, in the peripheries of great cities and in the countryside. All too many children continue to be exploited, maltreated, enslaved, prey to violence and illicit trafficking. Still too many children live in exile, as refugees, at times lost at sea, particularly in the waters of the Mediterranean. Today, in acknowledging this, we feel shame before God, before God who became a child.

And we have to ask ourselves: Who are we, as we stand before the Child Jesus? Who are we, standing as we stand before today's children? Are we like Mary and Joseph, who welcomed Jesus and care for him with the love of a father and a mother? Or are we like Herod, who wanted to eliminate him? Are we like the shepherds, who went in haste to kneel before him in worship and offer him their humble gifts? Or are we indifferent? Are we perhaps people who use fine and pious words, yet exploit pictures of poor children in order to make money? Are we ready to be there for children, to "waste time" with them? Are we ready to listen to them, to care for them, to pray for them and with them? Or do we ignore them because we are too caught up in our own affairs?

"This will be a sign for us: you will find a child...". Perhaps that little boy or girl is crying. He is crying because he is hungry, because she is cold, because he or she wants to be picked up and held in our arms... Today too, children are crying, they are crying a lot, and their crying challenges us. In a world which daily discards tons of food and medicine there are children, hungry and suffering from easily curable diseases, who cry out in vain. In an age which insists on the protection of minors, there is a flourishing trade in weapons which end up in the hands of child-soldiers, there is a ready market for goods produced by the slave labor of small children. Their cry is stifled: the cry of these children is stifled! They must

fight, they must work, they cannot cry! But their mothers cry for them, as modern-day Rachels: they weep for their children, and they refuse to be consoled (cf. *Mt 2:18*).

“This will be a sign for you”: you will find a child. The Child Jesus, born in Bethlehem, every child who is born and grows up in every part of our world, is a diagnostic sign indicating the state of health of our families, our communities, our nation. Such a frank and honest diagnosis can lead us to a new kind of lifestyle where our relationships are no longer marked by conflict, oppression and consumerism, but fraternity, forgiveness and reconciliation, solidarity and love.

Mary, Mother of Jesus,
you who accepted, teach us how to accept;
you who adored, teach us how to adore;
you who followed, teach us how to follow. Amen.