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Pope Francis greets children dressed as the Magi as he accepts the offertory gifts during Mass for the feast of Mary, Mother of God, and World Peace Day on New Year's Day in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Jan. 1. (CNS/Vatican Media)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



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The world and the Catholic Church must respect and defend women and foster a motherly care for others to end dehumanizing cycles of violence, Pope Francis said.

"The church needs Mary in order to recover her own feminine face, to resemble more fully the woman, virgin and mother, who is her model and perfect image, to make space for women and to be 'generative' through a pastoral ministry marked by concern and care," the pope said during Mass in St. Peter's Basilica for the feast of Mary, Mother of God, and World Peace Day Jan. 1.

The world too, he said, "needs to look to mothers and to women in order to find peace, to emerge from the spiral of violence and hatred, and once more see things with genuinely human eyes and hearts."

In his homily, Pope Francis called on all societies to "accept the gift that is woman, every woman" and to "respect, defend and esteem woman in the knowledge that whoever harms a single woman profanes God, who was born of a woman."

The Mass marked the 57th World Day of Peace celebrated by the church. The pope's message for the world day, published in December, was dedicated to artificial intelligence and peace.

Pope Francis’ new year message

About 7,000 people attended Mass in St. Peter's Basilica for the feast of Mary, Mother of God, and World Peace Day Jan. 1. Click here for a video of Pope Francis'

new year message.

After praying the Angelus in St. Peter's Square following Mass, the pope said he was following "with concern" the situation in Nicaragua, where "bishops (and) priests have been deprived of freedom." A bishop and 12 priests have been arrested by Nicaraguan authorities since mid-December; Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa was sentenced in February to 26 years in prison. Dozens of other priests have been exiled and members of religious orders expelled from the country.

Some 7,000 people were present in the basilica for the celebration on New Year's Day, the Vatican said. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, was the main celebrant at the altar and was joined by Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister.

Placed near the main altar was an icon of the "Madonna Lactans" or Nursing Madonna — a late Byzantine image of Mary nursing the infant Jesus. In his homily, the pope asked people to look at the "tender" icon of the mother who "looks after us and is close to us."

Among those who presented the offertory gifts to Pope Francis were young people dressed as the three kings who visited Jesus. In Germany, Austria and other regions of Europe, children known as "sternsingers," or star singers, carol and collect donations between Christmas and the feast of the Epiphany. The three who presented the offertory gifts were joined by others dressed as the Magi sitting in the front row of the basilica.

A figurine of the infant Jesus was placed before the altar maintaining the Christmas atmosphere of the celebration. Several Christmas hymns were sung, including the German version of "Silent Night."

In his homily, Pope Francis recalled how just as Mary knew the wine had run out at the wedding at Cana and asked Jesus to intervene, she "knows our needs" and "intercedes to make grace overflow in our lives and to guide them to authentic fulfillment."

"Brothers and sisters, all of us have our shortcomings, our times of loneliness, our inner emptiness that cries out to be filled," he said. "Who can do that if not Mary the mother of fullness?"

"Whenever we are tempted to retreat into ourselves, let us run to her; whenever we are no longer able to untie the knots in our lives, let us seek refuge in her," the pope said.

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He added that the current times, "bereft of peace, need a mother who can reunite the human family." The pope encouraged people to look to Mary "in order to become artisans of unity" and to do so "with her maternal creativity and concern for her children."

Pope Francis noted that since God chose Mary to "turn history around" by bringing Jesus into the world, "it is fitting, then, that the year should open by invoking her," and that God's faithful should acclaim her as the "Holy Mother of God."

In that spirit, the pope ended his homily by asking the 24 cardinals, more than 200 concelebrating priests and the thousands present in the basilica to proclaim, "out loud, three times, together: Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, Holy Mother of God!"

Overlooking St. Peter's Square after Mass, Pope Francis asked people at the outset of the new year to notice the often-overlooked gestures of love of Mary, and all mothers, "to learn that love that is cultivated above all in silence."

The love of a mother, the pope said, "knows how to make room for the other, respecting their dignity, leaving the freedom to express themselves and rejecting every form of possession, oppression and violence."