



The Holy See

**CELEBRATION OF VESPERS
TO MARK THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEDICATION OF THE
PAPAL BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAJOR
AND THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY OF THE SNOWS**

*Basilica of Saint Mary Major
Monday, 5 August 2024*

[[Multimedia](#)]

There are two signs that characterize this celebration. The first is the traditional “snowfall”, which will soon take place during the *Magnificat*. The second is the icon of the *Salus Populi Romani*. If we interpret these two signs well, they can help us grasp the message of the word of God that we prayed in the Psalms and heard in the Reading.

The “*snowfall*”. Is it merely folklore or does it have symbolic value? This depends on us, on how we perceive it and the meaning we give it. We all know that it evokes the extraordinary phenomenon that pointed out to Pope Liberius the place where the original basilica was to be built. Yet, the re-presentation of this sign on today’s solemnity, inside the basilica and during the liturgy, invites us to understand it symbolically.

I suggest, then, that we allow ourselves to be guided by a verse from the book of Sirach, which says the following about the snow that God causes to fall from the sky: “The eye marvels at the beauty of its whiteness, and the mind is amazed at its falling” (*Sir* 43:18). Here the book’s author highlights the twofold feeling aroused in the human soul by the natural phenomenon: *marvel* and *amazement*. Seeing the snow fall, “the eye marvels” and “the mind is amazed”. This leads us to interpret the sign of the snowfall, understanding it as a symbol of *grace*, that is, of a reality that combines *beauty* and *gratuitousness*. Grace cannot be deserved, let alone bought, it can only be received as a gift. As such, it is also totally unpredictable, just like a midsummer snowfall in Rome. Indeed, grace arouses marvel and amazement. Let us not forget these two words. We cannot lose

the ability to marvel and the ability to be amazed, as they are part of our experience of faith.

With this interior attitude, we can now turn to the second, much more important sign: the ancient *Marian Icon* which, as it were, is the gem of this Basilica. Here, grace fully acquires its Christian form in the image of the Virgin Mother with Child. The Holy Mother of God. Grace appears in its concreteness, stripped of every mythological, magical, and spiritualistic vesture always lurking in religion. In this Icon appears only what is essential: *the Woman and the Son*, as in the text of Saint Paul that we heard a moment ago, “God sent his Son, born of a woman” (*Gal 4:4*). The Woman is full of grace, conceived without sin, immaculate as the freshly fallen snow. God looked upon her with marvel and amazement – God also amazes himself –, and chose her as Mother because she is the daughter of his Son, who was begotten of him before time began, and whose Mother she became in the fullness of time. The Child holds the Holy Book with his left hand, and blesses with his right; and the first one to be blessed is his Mother, Blessed among all women. Her dark coloured mantle allows her Son’s golden garment to stand out. In him alone dwells all the fullness of divinity; and she, with uncovered face, reflects his glory. Let us all take time to look at Mary. Look at her in silence, seeing all these things in an icon through which all of us are made holy. Afterward, let us take some time to look at it.

This is why the faithful come to ask the Holy Mother of God for a blessing, for she is the mediatrix of the grace that always and only flows through Jesus Christ, by the action of the Holy Spirit. In a special way, during the forthcoming Holy Year of the Jubilee, many pilgrims will come to this Basilica to ask our Blessed Lady for a blessing. Today, we are gathered here as a kind of vanguard, invoking her intercession for the city of Rome, our city, and for the whole world, particularly for peace, that peace which is true and lasting only when it flows from repentant and forgiven hearts; forgiveness brings about peace because to forgive is the noble approach of the Lord; that peace which comes from the Cross of Christ, and from his Blood that he took from Mary and shed for the remission of sins.

I would like to conclude by addressing the Blessed Virgin in the words of Saint Cyril of Alexandria at the end of the Council of Ephesus: “Hail, Mary, Virgin Mother of God, light bearer, incorrupt vessel. Hail, O Virgin Mary, Mother and handmaid; Virgin, for the sake of him who was born from you; Mother, for the sake of him whom you carried in your arms... Hail, Mary, you are the most precious creature in the whole world... inextinguishable lamp; for from you was born the sun of justice” (*Homily 11, PG 77*). Holy Mother of God, pray for us.

And now I invite all of you – let us see if you are able to do it – to repeat together three times: Hail Holy Mother of God. All together, Hail Holy Mother of God. Hail Holy Mother of God. One more time but louder: Hail Holy Mother of God.
